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**How Theatre Adapts:**  
**Integrating Art, Commerce, and the Adaptation Industry**

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**How Theatre Adapts:  
Integrating Art, Commerce, and the Adaptation Industry**

**by**

**Ashley Malafronte**

**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

For my grandparents: Dee, who would take the train into the city as a teenager and see whatever Broadway show looked good in the paper; and Tony, who boasted about seeing student productions in tiny Florida basements. Had they not marched our whole family through the doors of the New Amsterdam Theatre one winter afternoon, this work would not exist.

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## **Abstract**

### **How Theatre Adapts: Integrating Art, Commerce, and the Adaptation Industry**

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From the big-budget stages of Broadway to more experimental, independent theatre scenes, cross-medium adaptations dominate the landscape of U.S. theatre. The proliferation of adaptations into theatre—and the extreme concentration of budgetary resources, acclaim, and audience reach that attend them—is the observation that launched this research. This thesis converges scholarship from theatre studies, performance studies, and adaptation studies to position cross-medium adaptation as an effective strategy to maintain the economic viability of theatre without compromising the oft-lauded qualities of liveness and ephemerality. Through two case studies, I map relationships between the theatre, book, and film industries—and their stakeholders—to further an understanding of adaptation within a multi-industrial system of production that impacts both the artistic and business practices of cultural production. Participation in what Simone Murray calls the *adaptation industry* provides links to other, non-theatrical entertainment industries, and creating work in this system enables some aspects of

contemporary theatrical production while constraining others. Adaptation therefore accelerates the commodification of theatre by linking a theatrical performance to the extant product of its non-theatrical source. Disney Theatrical Productions, Ltd. embraces this commodification as a way of enabling theatrical production through a multi-pronged set of business synergy strategies, which the company deploys by activating a network of cross-divisional relationships within the larger Walt Disney Company. This approach facilitates theatrical production, though sometimes at the expense of artistry. Elevator Repair Service, by contrast, utilizes adaptation as a set of formal constraints to be made visible through performance. Despite this oppositional approach, Elevator Repair Service's *Gatz* retains the associational benefits of adaptation by trading on the prestige of its canonical source, *The Great Gatsby*. This thesis articulates the industrial forces at play in both of these cases while centering practitioners in an analysis of theatrical adaptation within a multi-industrial system. Ultimately, this research contributes to a growing body of scholarship on theatrical adaptations and argues for theatre makers' agency to navigate the potential business benefits to working in adaptation while defraying potential artistic costs.

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## Introduction: How Theatre Adapts

*I sort of see everything as a kind of adaptation, first of all.* When I interviewed John Collins over Zoom in January 2021, this was how he began to articulate his artistic process. *I think I'm most comfortable sort of seeing everything as needing some kind of translation to the form, you know what I mean?* And I do. A playtext is always markedly different from that same play in performance. The process of theatrical creation, especially for theatre that begins with or results in a published script, is inherently one of adapting a written text into the medium of performance—or vice versa. Practitioners and scholars alike interrogate this translation from page to stage constantly, such that the phrase “page to stage” returns nearly 650 million results on Google. An investigation of adaptation’s role in theatre is therefore an investigation into theatre as a form. As Joanne Tomkins writes in her editorial note to the *Theatre Journal* special issue on “Theatre and Adaptation,” it is “precisely because theatre is a syncretic form that reconfigures narratives and media, [that] adaptation and the adaptive process require examination” (ix).

Of course, this movement from text into performance does not qualify as adaptation in the eyes of many scholars. As Linda Hutcheon observes in *A Theory of Adaptation*, “every live staging of a printed play could theoretically be considered an adaptation in its performance... but most theories draw the line here and claim that only *some* dramatic productions merit the designation of adaptation” (39). The subset of productions to which Hutcheon refers are often what I will call cross-medium adaptations—works of theatre

that borrow their narrative from another medium. Significant rewrites of existing plays are more often considered adaptations, too, despite the lack of cross-medium transposition. Under this understanding, *West Side Story* may be considered an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* even though a production of *Romeo and Juliet* that preserved Shakespeare's text would not, even if that production used design elements to set the production in the context of warring gangs in mid-20th century New York. That distinction is not absolute, however, as Josephina Komporaly asserts in *Radical Revival as Adaptation* (2017). In theatre, the boundaries of adaptation as a category are substantially blurred. I consider that definitional instability as an opportunity to examine the extent to which acts of adaptation color theatrical practices.

Studying cross-medium adaptations into theatre is useful not just because theatre is inherently adaptive, but also because a focus on adaptation enables an approach to theater studies that makes visible the ways that the connection between art and commerce shapes the form. Adaptations serve as reminders that theatre does not exist in a vacuum. Through cross-medium adaptation, seemingly disparate arts and culture industries bump up against each other like tectonic plates. By attending to the process of transfer from one medium to another, I am asserting that this motion is as important as the mountains it creates. The process of adaptation therefore spans mediums and, as Simone Murray details in *The Adaptation Industry* (2012), has become an industry in its own right. Murray identifies and articulates the relationships between book and film industries to argue that the two work together to create one adaptation industry. In this thesis I expand Murray's concept to articulate theatre's place in the adaptation industry. This system of relationships impacts

theatrical creation, though these impacts have remained implicit— unspoken by practitioners and unexamined by scholars. Throughout, I take on the project of mapping some of the quintessential relationships between theatre and film and book industries to trace the way these industries— and their stakeholders— shift in response to the interlocking forces of globalization, capitalism, and rapid technological advancement.

By providing a nuanced understanding of what it means to undertake an adaptation, I will position adaptation as an effective strategy for theatrical viability— albeit one with substantial drawbacks that can offset its strengths if left unchecked. Ultimately, I will argue that adaptation’s biggest benefit for theatre lays not in its artistic interest, but in its ability to bend the unwieldy, inefficient economics of theatre into something streamlined and readily packaged for increased consumption. Adaptation accelerates the commodification of theatre by linking a theatrical performance to the extant commodity of its non-theatrical source, and that link always facilitates some aspects of theatrical production while inhibiting others. In particular, I will demonstrate the economic and reputational boosts that adaptation can offer theatrical production— from synergized revenue streams that pull from multiple exploitations of the same narrative property to an accumulation of prestige facilitated by the relationship to a canonical source. These benefits to the business operations of theatre enable adaptations to succeed in the theatre market, though they have the potential to hinder artistic practices. Therefore, this thesis endeavors to uncover the multi-industrial system of theatre adaptation as a way of arguing for theatre makers’ agency to reap the benefits theatrical adaptation might offer while defraying the potential artistic costs.

Individual productions must grapple with this double-edged nature of adaptation to ensure that they remain fiscally secure without allowing artistry to fall by the wayside. Therefore, this thesis takes the form of two case studies on very different methods of navigating the adaptation industry to create successful theatrical adaptations. The two case studies mark parameters of the ways that adaptation impacts the process of theatrical production at all stages. I pay particular attention to the ways that adaptation facilitates and restricts the artistic and economic possibilities for theatrical production. Both case studies analyze the adaptation processes of theatre companies that have been working consistently in adaptation for nearly three decades: Disney Theatrical Productions Ltd. (DTP) and Elevator Repair Service (ERS). DTP and ERS began making work in the New York City of the early 1990s, which locates them in a moment characterized by rapid gentrification and a global audience that has since become more and more accustomed to accessing art and culture at the click of a button. Participation in the adaptation industry has allowed both companies to reap fiscal and reputational benefits. However, their approaches to adaptation— from artistic processes to business models— are almost diametrically opposed.

My first case study focuses on the business practices of perhaps the biggest name in commercial theatre adaptations, Disney Theatrical Productions Ltd., and other units housed under the Disney Theatrical Group division of the Walt Disney Company. DTP has been a Broadway mainstay since *Beauty and the Beast* debuted in 1993. Their artistic and business strategies build on the innovation of the megamusical, a form popularized by Cameron Mackintosh and Andrew Lloyd Weber in their work on *Cats* (1981). Though

megamusicals are often identified by an aesthetic of opulence and spectacle made possible by their ultra-high budgets, or by the global reach of their productions, their massive marketing efforts are also noteworthy. Many megamusicals rely on adaptation from literature and film, including pre-Disney Broadway sensations like *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, and *Phantom of the Opera*. DTP's innovation on the form was to adapt their own films using the megamusical format and to utilize the extant global network of the corporation's nontheatrical units to develop, market, and produce their shows (Burston 163). Synergized resources across mediums facilitate Disney's success and make the company an apt case study as I consider the ways the source film figures into the life of a DTP megamusical. I parse the way that adaptation creates a network of cross-divisional relationships that make Disney's synergy strategies possible, as well as the significant drawbacks to such enthusiastic commodification of theatre. This case study tracks more than a quarter-century of theatrical engagement by a historically nontheatrical corporation to articulate the ways that Hollywood business strategies play out on Broadway. Through this analysis of DTP's work, I point to the potential for adaptation to facilitate business practices in a way that can extend to artistic practices, but which tends to actually inhibit artistic innovation where it is judged to be too great an economic risk.

In New York's Off- and Off-Off-Broadway scenes, however, alternative theatrical processes, company structures, and artistic motivations thrive. So, too, does adaptation. To represent this perspective, I analyze Elevator Repair Service's work on *Gatz*, the word-for-word adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* that went on to become a global phenomenon. Since 2006, the production has found audiences around the world, including

2019 runs in New York, Perth, and Abu Dhabi. At each stop on its global tour, the production racks up fawning reviews from critics who praise qualities that differ vastly from that of a megamusical. Association with such a famous source gave ERS the leeway to stage their experimental production. My chapter on ERS therefore uses an analysis of prestige to contextualize the company's approach to adaptation and the way the performance has been received. Unlike DTP, ERS resists the commodification that adaptation can engender, though both companies' productions benefit from participation in the same adaptation industry. Where DTP embraces the ways that adaptation can enable theatrical production— sometimes at the expense of artistry— ERS instead positions adaptation as a set of constraints that their production can make visible through performance.

My intention, in placing these two seemingly disparate companies in the same study, is to demonstrate the flexibility and power of the adaptation industry when put to work in theatrical production. In comparing these two cases, core tensions in theatrical adaptation emerge: commercial versus nonprofit production; art versus commerce; ephemerality versus commodification; the form of theatre versus film versus literature. The two companies navigate these and other tensions in unique ways, though adaptation remains a salve for inefficient economics across both studies. By linking theatrical production to extant artistic products like films and books—and the film and book industries that produced those products—adaptations gain useful footholds that facilitate the commodification of theatre. Through participation in the adaptation industry, theatre becomes more economically viable without compromising the oft-lauded qualities of

liveness and ephemerality. This thesis examines the strategic utility of theatrical adaptation, paying particular attention to the relationship between economic and artistic tactics of cross-medium adaptations.

U.S. theatre exists within a capitalist economy that rewards individual cultural products for their adherence to its values of efficiency, replicability, and recognizability. Theatre, for its part, resists these mandates by stubbornly clinging to the tenets of liveness and embodiment. Both Peggy Phelan and Jill Sigman celebrate this connection between performance and anticapitalist praxis in their writings on the ontology of performance. Sigman, in developing her concept of “live body-based performance,” writes that such performance “embodies the opposite of good capitalist practice,” by consuming far more resources than it produces (154). Phelan speaks to a similar inefficiency in the reception and reproduction of theatre, writing that “performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital” (148). Both revel in theatre’s inefficiencies, whether in production or reception, as sites of resistance to capitalism.

Of course, resisting capitalism is not equal to transcending it. Theatrical productions are still beholden to fiscal concerns and must abide by business and legal regulations. Though this is true for all theatre, Broadway productions face high stakes due to high budgets. The average Broadway musical requires \$5-8 million for its initial capitalization, though the turn toward megamusicals with megasized budgets has led to a record-setting initial capitalization of \$75 million for the 2011 flop *Spider-Man: Turn off the Dark* (Gioia). Once Broadway musicals have gone through all stages of development

and are running, they continue to incur weekly running costs of \$300,000-\$500,000. (For *Spider-Man*, that weekly cost was over \$1 million.) Despite these high costs, only one fifth to one third of musicals ever recoup on their initial investments. The Broadway musical is therefore uniquely positioned at the nexus of art and commerce, where its increased financial exposure renders it more susceptible to the whims of the market. For this type of theatre, profitability and risk minimization are therefore higher priorities than the anticapitalist potential of theatre that Sigman and Phelan value. In noncommercial theatre production, which is supported by other income sources in addition to box office revenue, the need to profit may be mitigated but producers still calculate risk carefully. While adaptation is by no means a failsafe (we need only look to *Spider-man*), it certainly seems like a safer bet than original narratives for investors and audiences alike.

### **PERFORMING ADAPTATION STUDIES**

While theatre and performance scholars have not ignored the fact of adaptation, they have very infrequently approached adaptations *as adaptations*. I borrow this emphasis from Hutcheon, who has written that adaptations should be read *as adaptations*— that is, as “deliberate, announced, and extended revisions of prior works” (xiv). Hutcheon champions an emphasis on intentionality and formal innovation in the context of intermediality. More often, theatre scholars have compiled anthologies or how-to-guides (Field 2003; Zatlin 2005); employed adaptation as a methodology or pedagogy (in chamber theatre and oral interpretation) (Breen 1978; Bowman 1995; Dieckmann 1999); or studied cross-medium adaptations like any other performance. The legacy of these approaches



remains strong in contemporary studies of adaptation in theatre. My intervention into the field is therefore to add to the growing subfield of theatre scholarship that approaches adaptation *as adaptation*, and to do so in a way that foregrounds the economic implications of adaptation.

The most prevalent and enduring strand of adaptation-focused performance scholarship is oral interpretation, in which literature is analyzed through performance. As Jane Barnette writes, oral interpretation is at the root of “the praxis of literary adaptation” (Barnette 18). Barnette traces the genealogy of oral interpretation through generations of teachers and students in Northwestern University’s School of Communication. This lineage begins with the mid-20th century scholarly work of Wallace Bacon and Robert Breen and continues today in productions by contemporary theatremakers like Frank Galati, Mary Zimmerman, and the Lookingglass Theatre ensemble. In “The Place of Performance in Performance Studies,” Tracy Stephenson Shaffer historicizes this practice, paying particular attention to the way that oral interpretation uses performance-making as a method of analysis. For Shaffer, oral interpretation offers a scholarly approach that maintains performance-making at the “sturdy core” of performance studies (51). In oral interpretation, Shaffer finds a seventy-year scholarly tradition in which performance is not only a precursor to publication, but often a worthy academic substitute. Shaffer argues that the National Communication Association’s decision to change the “Oral Interpretation” division’s name to “Performance Studies” in 1990 signaled a broadening of both the method and subject of the field, therein solidifying performance as a valid scholarly undertaking. Disciplinary solidification of this sort encouraged scholars to begin

“embrace[ing] a plural performance studies” in which oral interpretation can exist alongside other methodologies (56). If, as Shaffer suggests, oral interpretation’s persistence in performance studies has created a “place for performance in performance studies” through its connection to performance-making, then it has also created a place for adaptation studies in performance studies through its use of literary adaptation.

Despite oral interpretation’s significant contributions to the field of performance studies, it is not equipped to account for the study of existing adaptations or the business logics that shape them. Since its inception, oral interpretation has remained a province of the academy— a primarily pedagogical approach to adaptation rather than a professional one. Although some artists trained in oral interpretation continue to work in adaptation in their professional careers, their approaches to adaptation would not be characterized as oral interpretation. For all of these reasons, the form is one level removed from the commercial pressures faced by non-academic professional theatre. Additionally, since oral interpretation utilizes adaptation as a method of study rather than the object of study, it cannot be redirected toward the study of existing cross-medium adaptations. Therefore, scholarship on adaptation must be wary of overreliance on oral interpretation so that the field does not slip further into these limitations.

Recently, theatre studies and adaptation studies have begun to converge in fruitful ways that go beyond oral interpretation’s methodological utility. In 2009, the International Federation of Theatre Research established the Translation, Adaptation and Dramaturgy working group, which convenes annually and has put out two publications. *Theatre Journal*’s 2014 special issue on “Theatre and Adaptation” helped to solidify the foothold

of theatre adaptation studies, and the Palgrave Macmillan's book series on *Adaptation in Theatre and Performance*— which has grown to eight volumes since 2017— has provided deeper and more specific explorations at the intersection of adaptation and performance. Some of these volumes function as case studies on theatre practitioners (i.e. Robert Lepage) or frequently adapted characters (i.e. Sherlock Holmes), while others elaborate on connections between adaptation and particular themes (i.e. Nation), periods (i.e. Elizabethan and Jacobean drama), or approaches to production (i.e. radical revivals, collaborative art). To date, however, no scholarship has endeavored to connect the artistic and business practices of theatrical adaptation. This thesis therefore expands upon this newly popular subfield in a way that analyzes not just the aesthetic, formal, and thematic implications of adaptation, but also the impact of adaptation on the economics of theatre. To do so, I borrow from more recent scholarship in adaptation studies.

#### **TURNING TOWARD THE ADAPTATION INDUSTRY**

The primary strand of adaptation studies this thesis employs is the materialist turn that Karen E. Kline identified in her 1996 article “The Accidental Tourist on Page and Screen: Interrogating Normative Theories About Film Adaptation.” In this article, Kline illuminates four methodological pathways for analyzing film adaptations of novels. Knowledge of these paradigms, which had otherwise been implicit in adaptation studies, would enable adaptation scholars to be more reflexive in their approach to their subjects. Kline arranges the four paradigms from the most internally oriented (translation) to the most externally oriented (materialist). Under the translation paradigm, a film's merit is

based on its fidelity to its source text. This paradigm assumes that direct equivalence between the two mediums is possible. At the other end of the spectrum, Kline identifies an emergent materialist paradigm, or materialist turn, that privileges extratextual influences, especially cultural-historical contexts, over direct comparison between novel and film. In scholarship that operates under this paradigm, Kline writes, “the influence of that [literary] source is mitigated by the larger and stronger influences stemming from the commercial system within which the film is produced” (74). This systemic understanding of adaptation allows for renewed focus on the process of adaptation rather than a reductive, fidelity-reliant comparison between two of its products.

Murray’s work in *The Adaptation Industry* takes up Kline’s materialist paradigm by factoring commercial interests and systems of production into the study of adaptation. She maps the roles and relationships of various stakeholders in the process of adaptation between the book and film industries, focusing particularly on authors, agents, publishers, book prize committees, scriptwriters, and screen producers and distributors. These stakeholders constitute a network that structures the production of cross-medium adaptations between the book and film industries. Murray’s work attends to process and action to centralize the relationships and structures that adaptation studies had not previously explored, including the “industrial structures, interdependent network of agents, commercial contexts, and legal and policy regimes within which adaptations come to be” (6). Murray, like Kline, upholds adaptation studies’ disciplinary preference for works of film and literature. As such, one of the core goals of this thesis is to extend the concept of the adaptation industry into the theatre industry. I argue that theatrical cognates to these

structures and stakeholders exist in figures such as producers, playwrights, directors, marketing managers, theatrical agents, and entertainment lawyers. Careful attention to these theatre workers' strategies and choices reveals the ways that theatre participates in a multi-medium adaptation industry.

One of Murray's central objectives is to trace the effects the adaptation industry has on the individual arts and entertainment industries that participate in its network. She argues that literary and cinematic processes change when they undergo the process of adaptation, and specifically that the "encompassing adaptation industry both constrains and—crucially—*enables* adaptation in little analyzed ways" (6, author's emphasis). The significance of this duality cannot be overstated. Again and again throughout the following two chapters, adaptation simultaneously facilitates and inhibits aspects of theatrical production. In fact, artistic leaders like directors, producers, and playwrights often choose to work in cross-medium adaptation because they want to court this duality, as I will demonstrate in the work of both Disney Theatrical Productions and Elevator Repair Service. Of course, this does not mean that these production stakeholders are always aware of their participation in an adaptation industry. In the case of Elevator Repair Service, adaptation provides a useful friction that the ensemble uses to create. Their approach resembles the way Hutcheon talks about adaptation by comparing it to a graphic novel's grid structure. "Like all formal conventions," she writes, "this grid both constrains and enables; it both limits and opens up new possibilities" (35). The fact that Murray and Hutcheon both choose the verbs *enable* and *constrain* is significant. In context, Hutcheon's emphasis leans toward the aesthetics and artistry of adaptation, while Murray dwells more

on the business of adaptation and its economic implications. That they are unified in their verb choice points to a truth about adaptation: it is always at play on both of these levels. Through adaptation, the aesthetic and the economic realities of creative work are placed in direct relation to one another.

### **RE-INTERROGATING THE WHEEL**

By converging these theories from adaptation studies as well as theatre and performance studies, this thesis primarily aims to articulate the way that adaptation impacts both artistic and business aspects of theatrical production. A secondary objective, however, is to make a place for increased theatrical adaptation scholarship by further disrupting adaptation studies' long-standing habit of comparing film adaptations to literary sources and ignoring all other types of cross-medium adaptation. Adaptation studies has defaulted to dyadic comparisons of this kind since the 1957 publication of George Bluestone's *Novels into Film*, which is widely regarded as a foundational text in adaptation studies. To this day, a preeminent journal in the field is called *Literature/Film Quarterly*. That the word "literature" or "novel" precedes "film" in both of these titles is no accident. This positioning problematically places text in the position of the source/original such that it is more valuable than its filmic derivatives, while performance remains entirely invisible. Thomas Leitch, an English professor who runs the Film program at the University of Delaware, makes a convincing case for the implications of this hierarchical relationship between mediums:

Studies of adaptation tend to privilege literature over film in two ways. By organizing themselves around canonical authors, they establish a preemptive

criterion for each new adaptation. And by arranging adaptations as spokes around the hub of a strong authorial figure, they establish literature as a proximate cause of adaptations that makes fidelity to the source text central to the field. (Leitch 17)

Though the wheel image that Leitch puts forth merits extended attention, I must first note that these warnings appear in *The Literature/Film Reader: Issues of Adaptation*—another publication that places literature at the hub and film at the spokes of the wheel of adaptation. Through his revelation of the logocentric assumptions from which the field of adaptation studies sprouted, Leitch warns of the additional pitfalls of privileging fidelity and canonicity in studies of adaptation. The spokes of Leitch’s wheel must remain faithful to their hub in order for the relationship between them to continue functioning. As Leitch later points out, however, scholarship that engages in fidelity criticism “will always give their source texts, which are always faithful to themselves, an advantage so enormous and unfair that it renders the comparison meaningless” (30). Adaptation cannot mimic the source text as well as the source itself can, which makes fidelity a poor measure of success or excellence. Moreover, the overemphasis on films adapted from canonical works of literature creates a closed circuit of attention that only serves to re-emphasize the importance of the literary source. To extend Leitch’s metaphor, then, it becomes clear that the spokes— or adaptations— are precisely what allows the hub to keep rolling and maintain relevance. Adaptations therefore contribute to the cementing of canonical positioning through the implicit assertion that the source text merits revisiting. Scholarship that attends primarily to adaptations from the canon simply close this circuit by applying

the value of fidelity and finding, to no one's surprise, that the original work of literature has done a better job of being itself.

This thesis takes up Leitch's defense of film's place in adaptation studies in hopes of carving out space for theatre, and for performance more broadly. This view of source-as-hub and adaptation-as-spoke has allowed scholars to skip over theatrical production in their treatment of adaptations by demoting productions to the level of the spoke and then declining to study them. When the literature considers theater at all, the focus is almost exclusively on case studies of dramatic literature from the Western canon— Shakespeare, usually—that have been adapted into film. The scholarship treats these plays as texts only and fails to deal seriously with these pieces as performance. Without a performance analysis of these productions, however, adaptation studies misses critical intertexts. Imagine, for example, a case study of Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996) that only considered the film as an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* text. This analysis would fail to account for the ways that the images, characterization, and action of Branagh's film exist in dialogue with stage conventions of performances of *Hamlet*. Such an analysis could not account for the interaction in Act 5, Scene 1 between Hamlet and Yorick's skull. Hamlet lifts the skull to the height of his own head and gazes at it, his arm extended in a grand arch. The next shot is tighter on this same pose, reinforcing the intensity of the moment as the viewer sees both man and skull in profile. Then, the film cuts to change perspective so that Yorick's skull fills the screen and faces the audience directly. This last shot is of the same moment, but from Hamlet's point of view. The pose Hamlet strikes in this scene recalls a trope of 19th century melodrama and has become standard in



performances of *Hamlet*, but nothing in the text itself calls for this staging. Therefore, textual analysis of this scene would miss both the theatrical referent and the ways that Branagh uses filmic techniques of perspective to encourage the audience to self-identify with Hamlet. Since theatrical performance is such a significant intertext for Branagh's film, it would clearly be a mistake to consider Shakespeare's text as the film's sole source. In this way, theatre productively blurs the difference between spoke and hub. While it is true that the script often acts as a source for a production—as Collins and Tompkins have asserted—that text is also a component of performance as well as a form of performance documentation. By taking into account the performance of theatrical texts as well as the systemic contexts in which theatre is created, this thesis makes the case for a more robust treatment of theatrical adaptations in adaptation studies.

### **THE IDIOM OF ADAPTATION**

I will not endeavor to propose a single, universally applicable definition of adaptation. As we have already seen, no such definition exists; the word *adaptation* endures in all its “confusing simplicity” (Hutcheon 15). I like Hutcheon's turn of phrase here because it acknowledges that adaptation is both obvious and subjective as a concept. Individual theories of adaptation contribute to individualized connotative compasses, making the project of categorization a difficult one. This process is therefore complex, but that does not mean it is necessarily a problem. As Julie Sanders writes at the beginning of *Adaptation and Appropriation*, “the idiom in which adaptation and appropriation functions is rich and various, and any of the same should surely reflect this fact” (Sanders 3). Writing

about adaptation must be able to jump between the commonplaces of the disciplines it spans. For this reason, I will use words like “transposition,” “palimpsest,” and “translation” that adaptation studies has borrowed from other disciplines. I will also assemble my working vocabulary from the subfields this project positions itself within— theatre studies of adaptation and the materialist paradigm of adaptation studies. Insofar as I will offer a definition of adaptation, it is essential to understand that the usage of adaptation refers to both a process of creation and the product created through that process. Hutcheon proposes this “double definition of adaptation as a product (as extensive, particular transcoding) and as a process (as creative reinterpretation and palimpsestic intertextuality) [as] one way to address the various dimensions of the broader phenomenon of adaptation” (22).

Theatre studies is particularly prepared to consider the process of adaptation, as the discipline is accustomed to studying performance in a way that includes the processes of creation and reception. Barnette has coined the portmanteau *adapturgy* to apply this process-oriented lens to theatre adaptation in a way that engages Hutcheon’s “palimpsestic intertextuality” while reveling in the multiple layers of narrative and meaning at play in adaptation. Barnette urges adaptation scholars and dramaturgs to shift “attention away from *what* is adapted to questions of *how* it is received, [such that] our understanding of adaptation expands to consider cultural context as well as material concerns of accessibility” (23). I would extend this statement so that “how it is received” can be included within the wider-reaching “how it is made”— an orientation to the process of adaptation that remains inclusive of the artistic process as well as the marketing, legal, and other business dimensions. That is, while I echo Barnette’s call for a dramaturgical

approach to adaptation, it seems that pursuing intertexts and contexts still falls short of a comprehensive understanding of the systems that make adaptation possible. As Murray argues, these systems are themselves part of the process of adaptation. This broader study of process takes on an understanding of the adaptation industry at play, in which artistic and economic processes are understood as co-constitutive.

The end result of the adaptation process is, of course, an adaptation. I limit this thesis's scope to cross-medium adaptations into theatre, which I have defined as a work of theatre based on a narrative from a work in another medium. My definition exists in conscious alignment with Barnette's work, particularly her definition of adaptation for the stage as "any 'text' (not necessarily made of words) that the author (or company) recognizes to be based on another text— this material (upon which the adapted work is based) we will call the source" (23). This definition provides many useful parameters: it is expansive in its concepts of "text" and authorship; it requires a conscious reference to source by its creators; and it is clear about the relationship between source and adaptation. Using these criteria, for example, *The Wiz* qualifies as an adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*, and the 1939 *The Wizard of Oz* film counts as an adaptation of L. Frank Baum's 1900 novel of the same name. Despite sharing many plot similarities, none of these works would be considered adaptations of Lewis Carroll's 1865 *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The upcoming Netflix series *Dorothy & Alice*, on the other hand, positions itself as an adaptation of both. These complex narrative genealogies sit at the heart of adaptation studies scholarship, and this thesis proposes that adaptation practitioners move with agency through the network of stakeholders and actions that structure the process of adaptation.

Practitioners navigate that process by understanding connections not only between their adaptation and its source, but among the many stakeholders whose actions make up the adaptation industry.

For this reason, it is useful to place adaptation on a scale of referentiality, as Julie Sanders does in *Adaptation and Appropriation*. At one end of this spectrum lies quotation, which “can be differential or critical, supportive or questioning,” but remains clearly framed in the work that quotes it (Sanders 4). Sanders places appropriation at the other end of this spectrum, writing that it “carries out the same sustained engagement as adaptation, but frequently adopts a posture of critique, even assault” (Sanders 4). Quotation and appropriation would both fall outside the purview of the adaptation industry—the former because its citational engagement with the source is too shallow, and the latter for its tendency toward parody and satire, which often remove the new work from industrial connections to its source. Adaptation’s sustained engagement and non-antagonistic relationship with its source is key to the functions of the adaptation industry.

With all this fanfare around efforts to define adaptation, the word “source” tends to escape critique. What’s a source? The obvious answer is that the text upon which the adaptation is based serves as its source. Connotatively, however, the word source also carries associations with the concepts of beginning, genesis, and origin. Contemporary adaptation studies scholars therefore worry that the term source could tip the field backward into regressive fidelity criticism. Hutcheon aims to escape this pitfall by using the term “adapted text” instead of *source* or *original*, though her solution can be confusing when employing Barnette’s broader definition of the concept of a text (xiii). In this sense,

the novelization of a *Star Wars* film would be an adapted text adapted from the adapted text of the film. For this reason, the term *source* remains throughout this thesis.

Ultimately, I am less interested in defining or putting up borders around what might be considered adaptation than utilizing adaptation to study ways that economic and artistic decisions interlock in the creation of theatre. Adaptation, through its double definition as product and process, simply acts as a lens through which these decisions come into focus. My approach is also informed by the disciplinary habits of performance studies, specifically Diana Taylor's assertion that her "particular investment in performance studies derives less from what it is than what it allows us to do" (Taylor 16). Performance, like adaptation, is a phenomenon composed of both process and product. By moving between those aspects of performance, performance studies points to what performance *does*. Similarly, the two case studies that follow move beyond reductive discussions of what individual performances mean to consider how that meaning is constructed and what it enacts.

#### **CASE STUDIES: METHODS & SUBJECTS**

"How Theatre Adapts" traces two case studies through their entanglements with the adaptation industry, paying particular attention to the ways that adaptation facilitates and restricts the artistic and economic possibilities for theatrical production. To conduct this analysis, I have examined available archival documents (promotional materials, casting announcements, production reviews, financial reports, etc.), existing scholarship on the companies I study, and practitioner interviews conducted as part of this thesis. I examined

each of these sources to identify the particular adaptation strategies present in the business and artistic processes of Disney Theatrical Productions, Ltd. and Elevator Repair Service. As a result, each case study focuses on a core theatrical innovation that used adaptation as a catalyst— DTP’s corporatization of commercial theatre production, and then ERS’s experimentation with the theatrical form. This analysis revealed that both companies made use of adaptation’s facilitative capacity, parlaying association with a source into unique combinations of streamlined business practices, increased audience awareness, exciting artistic challenges, quasi-canonical prestige, and more.

Chapter 2, “The Content King: Disney Theatrical Productions’ Business Synergy,” is a case study on DTP. Disney Theatrical Group is perhaps the biggest name in theatrical adaptations; it consists of Disney Theatrical Productions Limited (DTP), Disney Theatrical Licensing, Disney Live Family Entertainment and other performance-based units. In the early 1990s, Disney made a home for itself on Broadway by using cross-medium adaptation to extend its work in other mediums— most notably theme parks and film— onto the stage. Beginning with *Beauty and the Beast* (1992), Disney has brought eight of its film properties into the Broadway ecosystem. The genre of the megamusical, which had made frequent use of adaptation since its inception, became a vehicle that would allow Disney to transport its various narrative properties among mediums. With these narratives, Disney also adapted the business practices of a global entertainment power. Essentially, Disney operates a self-sustaining adaptation industry among its own divisions, which has allowed DTP to introduce business synergy to Broadway. Adaptation offers DTP an opportunity to create more economically sound theatrical ventures. The company continues

to embrace this risk avoidant approach to musical theatre production by trending toward a streamlined artistic process in recent years, despite sustained ridicule from critics, scholars, and anyone who holds a torch for the concept of theatre as high art. DTP's business structure and production history illuminate the tendency for business interests to overrun their artistic counterparts at this level of corporate control.

ERS, by contrast, sees the process of adaptation as an opportunity to trouble the formal aspects of theatre. Chapter 3, "Resisting the Novel: Elevator Repair Service's *Gatz*," focuses on *Gatz*, ERS's most renowned production, which began with the desire to experiment with theatrical form by staging every word of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The company's exploration of medium-specificity resulted in an eight-hour feat of theatrical endurance, which many scholars have positioned as anticapitalist due to its office setting and unusual duration. However, an understanding of the adaptation industry— and especially its ability to bestow cultural capital and prestige on adaptations— unlocks a more nuanced understanding of *Gatz*'s success. Ultimately, ERS trades on the canonical status of *The Great Gatsby* to conduct their theatrical experiment. Rather than supplanting a literary work with a theatrical one, *Gatz*'s verbatim approach layers them on top of one another. ERS's approach makes the process of adaptation visible within the product, which in turn calls attention to the adaptation industry. By actively resisting their source text with theatrical conventions, ERS actually puts the power of the adaptation industry on full display.

These two case studies offer two substantively different approaches to theatre adaptation at the turn of the 21st century. While the durational, verbatim style of ERS's

*Gatz* is far removed from the spectacle and catchy soundbites of Disney's *The Lion King*, these productions benefit from participation in the same adaptation industry. Adaptation gives these companies access to such tools as audience pre-awareness, considerations of copyright, and reputational benefits of prestige and canonicity. In this way, adaptation makes theatre more efficient and replicable without giving up the sense of liveness that audiences expect. The adaptation industry enables theatrical adaptations; however, Murray and Hutcheon both remind us that adaptation is also a constraint. By parsing successful cross-medium adaptation strategies of both DTP and ERS, I aim to demonstrate exactly what tradeoffs adaptation may require from theatrical stakeholders.

Throughout this thesis, I assert theatrical adaptation's place in the adaptation industry, in order to keep a firm grasp on both the artistic and business aspects of theatrical production. By centering practitioners throughout this analysis of adaptation as a multi-industrial system, I argue for theatre makers' agency to navigate the potential benefits and costs of working in adaptation. I return repeatedly to the functions of the adaptation industry both to add to the growing body of scholarship on theatrical adaptations and to empower practitioners to make informed choices in their work on future adaptations.



## Chapter 1

### The Content King: Disney Theatrical Productions' Business Synergy

When Broadway shut down on March 12, 2020, musicals were running in twenty of its forty-one theatres. Nine of these were cross-medium adaptations, and three of those nine were Disney-branded properties. Given the limited Broadway ecosystem, adaptations have gained a reputation as a sort of invasive species. They're pretty to look at and easy to grow, until you realize they're taking up all the space and air. By 2020, adaptations had encroached so severely that Mark Peikert, former Editor-in-Chief of *Playbill*, called it a "tipping point where all these amazing shows, like (Michael R. Jackson's Pulitzer-winning) *A Strange Loop* had no Broadway theater to transfer to... instead we got three more movie to stage adaptations" (Teeman). Peikert's frustration, of course, is not merely a disdain for narratives imported from other mediums; he goes on to call for greater attention to diversity, representation, and the "sense of Broadway as a real place of innovation" when theater returns (Teeman). Implicit in his statement is the assumption that adaptations curb opportunities for diversity—perhaps through their invocation of a white Western canon—and tamp down the potential for artistic risk on the highest-budget stages in the U.S.A.

Peikert's call to action engages a long-standing tension between cross-medium adaptations and "original" musicals. Jeff Bowen and Hunter Bell dramatize the interplay between adapted musicals and their non-adapted foils early in *[title of show]*, their metamusical about writing a Broadway musical. In "An Original Musical," a duet between Jeff and the Blank Page he can't seem to fill, the Blank Page lists more than a dozen of the books, plays, and—"more recently"—movies that have spawned Broadway musicals. When Jeff remarks "Wow! So movies make good musicals," the Blank Page archly counters "Well, they make musicals" (Bowen). The Blank Page's retort is calibrated to

elicit knowing laughter from an audience that has just walked by marquees for shows like *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* to get to [title of show]. This line implicitly praises the audience for their discernment in choosing an original musical over a movie adaptation while also positioning Jeff and Hunter as valiant, true artists up against the machine of Hollywood-to-Broadway adaptations. Despite critiques from a whole range of Broadway stakeholders, however, adaptations continue to dominate the Broadway scene. If there is such disdain for adapted musicals, how and why do they persist?

For an answer to that question, I defer again to the Blank Page: “Well, if it was... a recognizable commodity,/ I’d say dream away, beotch. But original,/ On Broadway, baby, that is risky” (Bowen). The risk that the Blank Page so eloquently articulates here can be crushing. Since most Broadway productions are commercial endeavors, they are unsubsidized and subject to taxes, unlike their nonprofit counterparts. Broadway musicals’ box office revenues must therefore cover weekly running costs of up to half a million dollars while working toward the recoupment of millions of dollars owed to investors who had contributed to the show’s initial capitalization. As the Blank Page suggests, increased recognizability can curtail that risk.

In research on contemporary Broadway producing, scholars have often written, as Elizabeth Wollman does, on “the artistic death of the American theater on one hand, or its economic rebirth on the other” (465). If “artistic death” and “economic rebirth” are two sides of the same coin, then it is a very familiar coin to Broadway stakeholders from Peikart to Bowen’s Blank Page. In this chapter, I pursue an understanding of the invasive species of cross-medium adaptations through a case study on Disney Theatrical Productions, Ltd. (DTP), the largest contemporary driver of Broadway’s corporatization. When DTP began adapting their films for the stage in the 1990s, they imported more than just their narratives, characters, and songs. Disney went so far as to adapt their film industry business strategies

for the Broadway market, ushering in a wave of corporatization on Broadway. I will not be the first to argue that Disney has achieved its longevity, financial success, or global renown through a series of business synergy strategies. Through a focus on cross-medium adaptation, which impacts both the economic and artistic processes of theatrical production, this chapter asks how those processes are linked. How does the use of business synergy correspond with DTP's artistic practices? How do these artistic practices support the corporate structures, and how does theatrical commodification return that support to the artistic product?

Although DTP's approach to theatre producing has inarguable financial benefits, economic streamlining can encourage the kind of artistic simplifications and limitations that Peikart identifies. That is, successful economic risk avoidance has led to a reputation for similar artistic risk avoidance. To understand this relationship between artistic and business practices, this chapter begins by contextualizing Disney's entry onto Broadway following the first wave of megamusicals. It then traces the range of synergy strategies DTP employs and identifies implications of those strategies. These strategies reveal that DTP has engineered a version of the adaptation industry within the company itself, which facilitates some operations while inhibiting others. I then trace DTP's approaches to adaptation and the critical reception of those approaches throughout the company's production history to demonstrate the company's belief that the benefits of business synergy outweigh any potential detriments to the artistry of their theatrical productions.

I do not aim to raise Disney up as a paragon among lesser producers, or to demonize the company as a capitalist toxin tainting the otherwise pure world of theatre as art for art's sake. Instead, I will return repeatedly to this link between art and commerce to demonstrate that, despite the tension inherent between the two, each can actually reify the other. DTP exemplifies the ability to reach a point of synthesis between these competing interests,

albeit a tenuous one. Through this focus on DTP, I hope to illuminate the possibility for aesthetics and economics to support one another, even when systems seem predisposed against that collaboration.

## **MANUFACTURING THE MEGAMUSICAL**

Just over a decade before DTP began producing musicals, megamusicals swept through the Broadway landscape. Writing in the *New York Times* on the occasion of *Cats*' record-breaking 6,138th performance, William Grimes places the production at the beginning of "a wave of mega musicals that reshaped Broadway in the 1980s, redirecting the Broadway market toward blockbuster hits and foreign tourism" (Grimes). Producer Cameron Mackintosh and composer Andrew Lloyd Webber had turned their 1981 West End success into a global phenomenon. *Cats*'s success extended beyond a single show, however: it concretized a new form for commercial musical theatre that extended to all parts of a show's creation. As a result, Broadway became a home for long-running, expensive properties with supersized reputations that draw in an endless supply of tourist audiences, as Grimes suggests. Megamusicals' Fordist method of production made Broadway more hospitable to Disney's later occupation by implementing a set of mutually-sustaining artistic and business practices that emphasized reproducible replication over individuality or independence. More recently, adaptation— especially adaptation from film— has become an increasingly popular trend in megamusical production, suggesting that collaboration with other commercial entertainment industries can be a boon for the producers of Broadway musicals.

Although the traits of the megamusical have morphed slightly over time, musicologist Jessica Sternfeld acknowledges *Cats* as the first to combine a variety of core characteristics that continue to define megamusicals as a form. Sternfeld summarizes these

characteristics as inclusive of “both internal features (a sung-through score, an epic plot, large sets) and external ones (aggressive marketing, economic success, unenthusiastic critical reception, cultural currency)” (6). All of these factors are true of *Cats*, which pairs Weber’s mostly sung-through compositions with Mackintosh’s intensive marketing campaign to create a piece that leans into grand, sweeping emotions and spectacle while retaining a level of iconicity. *Cats* leapt over hurdles like lackluster early reviews and initial resistance from producers to become an enduring success. This success, too, is a characteristic of megamusicals, prompting Sternfeld to refer to the megamusical as “a money-making machine of unprecedented proportions” (4).

Through these tandem artistic and business efforts, the megamusical format brought a new level of mass production to theatre. According to Jonathan Burston, a scholar of the industrialization of musical theatre, Broadway’s producing practices in the age of the megamusical owe “more to Fordist logics of the production line than the craft-based model of reproduction that had preceded them” (23). This assembly line approach to musical theatre production allowed Mackintosh and Webber to produce exact reproductions— also known as replica productions— of *Cats* around the globe, creating similar experiences for all audiences worldwide through unified marketing efforts and replicated theatrical products. Replica productions present exact copies of the music, staging, and design of the Broadway and West End productions, but they also go beyond aesthetic mimicry to unify their marketing efforts and, therefore, the expectations of their audiences. The glowing yellow eyes of the *Cats* logo and Pucciniesque warbling of its showstopper, “Memory,” were omnipresent in the 1980s to such an extent that they eclipsed the new sets of actors, technicians, carpenters, and other theatre workers who assembled the show for each identical production. Susan Russell analyzes this approach through Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra, arguing that “by moving liveness into the

past, Macintosh could reproduce and distribute it” (99). That is, the staging of these productions fits into neat tracks, which means that new actors can take over positions in the show while it remains the same— a theatrical Ship of Theseus that endures through identical replacements. In this way, *Cats* became a static commodity made available daily in many cities, even as it masqueraded as a live theatrical production. While not equal to the on-demand entertainment that books or films might offer, *Cats* certainly moved theatre in the direction of mass production.

This Fordist system of theatrical production functions by harnessing the internal, artistic features of megamusicals in service of the business-oriented external features. The big sung-through score and massive visual spectacle are made possible by a host of performers who Russell calls “corporate actors.” Russell, who spent five years in the Broadway cast of Mackintosh and Webber’s *Phantom of the Opera*, writes that her “job was not about art, it was about fluid supply of product,” which the corporate actor manufactures “eight times a week, 52 weeks a year” (104). These individual performers—as well other non-managerial theatre workers offstage—are charged with carrying out the same tasks nightly to produce an identical experience for every audience (Russell 103). By placing replicable visuals at the center of the audience’s expectation for megamusicals, producers create a *commodity* that extends beyond the single night of live performance. The narrative, music, and stage action support that commodity through their uncomplex, buoyant clarity. While the penchant for spectacle seems like an isolated aesthetic choice upon first glance, the values that make megamusicals “big inside the theatre” also require them to be “big outside as well” (Sternfeld 3). Megamusicals’ bloated budgets extend to their aggressive marketing campaigns such that the hero images and other marketing materials— yellow eyes for *Cats*; a mask and a rose for *Phantom of the Opera*— become a recognizable iconography that points back at the spectacular on-stage aesthetics. This

approach is so successful that Sternfeld notes that “the marketing that accompanies a megamusical around the world makes it an easy commodity to sell” (4). Through bold, repeated visuals, the economic justification of aesthetic choices becomes visual. On the assembly line of megamusical theatre production, corporate practices sheath the inner workings of artistry. The act of commodification justifies and protects the act of creation, though it does so by limiting the parameters of creation to fit within the duties of a corporate actor.

Adaptation, as an artistic process inherently linked to multiple arts and entertainment industries, is therefore a natural fit for a theatrical form dependent upon a synthesis of artistic and business practices. Though Sternfeld does not list cross-medium adaptation among her initial criteria for megamusicals, she writes that *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *Les Misérables*— all adapted from literature— “are the strongest examples of those longevity and financial success” (3). Sternfeld’s study was published in 2006, and she observes in a section on the megamusical’s 21st Century context that “another trend in recent years.... involves adapting familiar films to stage” (352). As of 2021, seven of the ten longest running Broadway musicals are both megamusicals and adaptations from literature or film, including the three Sternfeld focuses on and two Disney shows (“Longest Running”). Producers of megamusicals have repeatedly seized upon adaptations in part because the association with a source—and the creative and corporate stakeholders that produced that source— facilitates steps of their production practice. In other words, the choice to engage in adaptation also has simultaneous aesthetic and economic implications that support the megamusicals’ mission to commodify musical theatre.

To understand adaptation’s place in megamusical production, it is necessary to look at theatrical adaptations’ participation in the multi-industrial system of production that

Simone Murray calls the adaptation industry. The adaptation industry comprises the stakeholders, structures, and policies that together transport a narrative from one medium—and the industry standards that produced it—to another (Murray 4). Murray demonstrates the ways that producers and marketers of cinematic adaptations push adapters to maintain a level of fidelity and referentiality to their source text that will appeal to audiences, then parade authors of the film’s literary sources at promotional events as signifiers of the film’s authenticity (Murray 35). This practice also plays out in megamusical production: *Cats*, an adaptation of T.S. Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, did not gain much traction until Eliot’s widow expressed interest. Valerie Eliot’s enthusiasm for the project bestowed it with the literary cache that Mackintosh and Webber parlayed into funding from investors and a contract with director Trevor Nunn (Rothstein). In this way, adaptation—like the sung-through score or the visual spectacle—contributes to megamusicals’ ability to create a replicable, packable product.

Adaptation is therefore key to the success of many megamusicals. An adaptation’s source is more than just a narrative to import into theatre; it is also a product with a reputation and built-in audience forged through the marketing of that product. Association with an extant source allows a cross-medium adaptation to begin with the advantage of audience “pre-awareness”—a term I borrow here from the film industry, where it is applied to franchises, remakes, and adaptations alike—of its content (Gumbel). If the source is from an established literary canon, its benefits may include associations with the author—as was true for *Cats*—well-known characters, and famous text or plot points that can be dramatized to the delight of fans. In the case of filmic sources, which have become more and more popular in the years since Sternfeld published her study, a production inherits an entire movement vocabulary and visual world that it can lean into or away from to engage with the audience’s expectations. Under the increasingly corporatist structures of



megamusical production, cross-medium adaptations can even mobilize the business structures of their sources to drum up support for the same narrative exploited in a new medium. Adaptation therefore becomes a catalyst for activity among the dense network of corporate relationships that make possible the commodification of musical theatre.

### **STAGING BUSINESS SYNERGY**

The Walt Disney Company began adapting its own movies into Broadway musicals just over a decade after Mackintosh, Webber, and their string of British imports had solidified the megamusical format as a dominant form of U.S. commercial musical theatre. In 1991, theater critic Frank Rich dubbed the *Beauty and the Beast* film “the best Broadway musical score of 1991” in *The New York Times*, and by 1993 Disney was ready to put Rich’s praise to the test (Rich). That year, Disney founded DTP as a division of Disney Theatrical Group, itself a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Studios. By April 1994, the company had secured a 49-year lease on the New Amsterdam Theatre, which the company renovated while its first Broadway musical, *Beauty and the Beast*, premiered just five blocks uptown. Twenty-seven years later, DTP has produced nine Broadway musicals, eight of which are adapted from extant Disney films, effectively making them the largest and most consistent producer of megamusical adaptations. DTP pushed Mackintosh and Webber’s megamusical format into its next stage of evolution— an argument I borrow from Jonathan Burston’s “Recombinant Broadway.” In making this delineation between the advent of the megamusical and what Burston calls “The Disney Movement,” I aim to emphasize the difference in scope between Disney and its predecessors and the centrality of adaptation to their operations. Rather than focus solely on an aesthetic analysis of DTP’s productions, this analysis centers the company’s business practices to demonstrate the ways that business structures both support and feed off of the artistry of DTP musicals.

Scholarship about DTP often employs the term *synergy*, borrowed in this context from the business world. In her article on “The Economic Development of the ‘New’ Times Square,” Elizabeth Wollman defines business synergy as a strategy in which “a company makes money both by selling a particular product and by integrating it into a cyclical web of related products” (449). This aptly describes Disney’s approach to commercial production, in which each new product based on a given narrative property increases awareness of other versions of that property, its story, and its characters. The *Frozen* musical on Broadway, for instance, helps to sell the Elsa costumes in the Disney Store in Times Square. Under this set of “synergy strategies,” as Burston calls them, “the stage becomes another platform for their efforts to fully exploit content which, as we are reminded ad nauseum in the trade press, is king in the digital era” (164). As just one revenue stream for a transnational, multimedia power player, DTP’s productions essentially double as marketing ploys— their tickets are a live extension of a single property that has already sold the same audience member any range of content, from movie tickets to plush toys to amusement park rides. Each piece of nontheatrical content also builds audience awareness of the theatrical production’s story and characters while supporting The Walt Disney Corporation’s bottom line.

Disney brought business synergy to Broadway producing in three forms: marketing, revenue, and production processes. Synergized marketing efforts increase the likelihood that a production will recoup on its initial capitalization, while synergized revenue streams defray the urgency of recoupment. Both of these benefits of DTP’s business synergy have been documented in scholarship. By cultivating an understanding of adaptation as a central component of corporate Broadway, however, I hope to demonstrate the ways that production processes are also streamlined in ways that mirror the other, more obviously business-oriented synergized processes.

Although megamusical production had already been streamlined for marketability through its replicable aesthetics, independent producers simply did not have the reach or resources necessary to create the “cyclical web” that DTP could easily spin through integration with Disney’s other divisions. For example, Wollman recounts an episode of the TV series *Sports Night*, in which a character receives free tickets to *The Lion King* and is “miraculously rejuvenated by the power of the production” (450). ABC, of course, is owned by Disney; this episode therefore advances both the plotline of this series and the larger business plans of Disney. In 2014, Disney utilized similar strategies repeatedly and more explicitly to promote its newest Broadway production, *Aladdin*. From *Nightline*’s behind-the-scenes feature to a cast performance on *The View* to a segment on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* that took place at the show, DTP was explicit in its efforts to promote one of its products through the other (Osatinski 414). In these cases, the synergized marketing efforts are obscured if the viewer does not know that Disney owns ABC, but plainly visible to those who know about their corporate linkage.

Disney employs more subtle instances of synergized marketing as well, often through efforts connected to its use of cross-medium adaptation. Susan Bennet tracks some of these efforts as they connect to DTP’s biggest hit in “*The Lion King: An International History*.” For instance, visitors to the Animal Kingdom theme park at Disneyworld might be excited to attend The Festival of the Lion King, especially if they are familiar with the movie *The Lion King*. At The Festival of the Lion King, which is offered hourly and included in the price of park admission, audiences would be treated to several songs from the Broadway show in what Bennet calls “an extended trailer for the ‘real thing,’ serving to whet the audience’s appetite for future Disney spending at one of the musical’s productions worldwide and, especially, at the one on Broadway” (Bennet 449). At The Festival of the Lion King, economic synergy is forged on the back of adaptation. In this

way, Disney's marketing efforts extend past the obvious in ways that call to mind Wollman's web metaphor. Each product simultaneously acts as product placement for other variations on the same property, and Disney sustains these connections by carrying the same narratives across different mediums. In other words, adaptation is the connective tissue that allows Disney to enact its synergy strategies.

DTP's second form of business synergy lies in its synergized revenue streams. DTP's corporatist practices create opportunities for financial streamlining that remain inaccessible to independent producers with more limited resources. While independent producers rely on a network of angel investors, DTP can conduct its capitalization campaign internally. Disney need not seek the approval of the Valerie Eliots of the world to persuade investors and other stakeholders to participate; in fact, DTP often does not have to seek any additional permissions from rights holders. The Walt Disney Company already owns the rights to its own films, of course, and it often has full permissions to continue adapting the sources of those films into new mediums. Thus, the company is spared the expense of courting investors, acquiring rights, and paying out dividends to copyright holders or angel investors. Disney's money, much like its cross-medium content, stays at Disney.

This fiscal streamlining means that the company can finance shows with record-setting budgets and then dodge questions about the details of their recoupment, as Disney is wont to do, but it also makes recoupment more attainable. Burston writes that "the increasing centrality of synergy strategies among transnational producers— all of whom can exploit theatrical properties across other media and merchandise— meant that theatrical recoupment was no longer as serious a concern as it had been for producers of the old school" (163). The dollar conserved through use of a company-owned studio or larger runs of a plush toy to be sold at both Broadway theaters and Disneyworld is a dollar

that can go toward recoupment or future budgets. Essentially, Disney's synergized revenue streams are made possible by the company's synergized marketing efforts.

Disney has furthered both its marketing and revenue synergy strategies by getting into the Manhattan real estate market. In 1994, Disney spent about \$6 million to renovate the New Amsterdam theater on 42nd street, a project to which the city of New York contributed an additional \$28 million. In return, the city receives 2% of Disney's ticket revenue for the duration of the company's 49-year lease on the space (Wollman 447). In the following years, other Disney properties cropped up around Times Square as well. My own experience in midtown Manhattan around this period suggests that Disney received a greater financial boost from this expansion than may be obvious to the consumer. Some of these, like the Disney Store my friend insisted we enter after a matinee performance of *Follies* across the street, were clear extensions of the Disney brand. Yet it was not until I began work on this thesis that I realized that my entire first trip to New York City, at the age of six, was essentially a visit to a Disney theme park. Before the twenty members of my family marched through the doors of the New Amsterdam to take our seats for *The Lion King*, we stopped for midtown-priced burgers at the ESPN Zone—a Disney property. At the time, Disney also had a street-level ABC television studio and a dining/sports entertainment venue (Wollman 447). I am not the first to draw this theme park analogy; the often disparaging references to the “Disneyfication” of Times Square are so numerous that it is difficult to attribute the term to any one source. Suffice to say that Disney's synergized revenue streams stem not just from the money that the company saves, but also the money it spends to create a density of products available for consumption.

Although business synergy both facilitates financial recoupment and alleviates some of the pressure to recoup, DTP's financial drive remains strong, as we will see in the following section of this chapter. One potential explanation for this behavior has to do with

the duality of DTP as a part of both a major corporation and, separately, the Broadway ecosystem. In “Disney Theatrical Productions: Anything Can Happen If You Let It,” Amy S. Osatinski articulates the balance DTP must strike as both a major player on Broadway and a smaller studio branch of a large, publicly traded entertainment corporation. She writes that while DTP is “a small part of Walt Disney Studios... it is a big company by Broadway standards” (Osatinski 414). DTP therefore functions as one of the grandest producers on Broadway while aiming to operate thriftily under the pressures of its parent company. Simone Murray, in her chapter on film producers and distributors, writes of film producers’ behavior in a way that mirrors DTP’s: their “greater financial exposure ensures that, when push comes to shove, film industry interests predominate” (188). Murray justifies this statement by demonstrating ways that film producers and distributors are more likely to make the decision that ensures financial security over one that attends to concerns of artistic integrity or connection to a source novel. On Broadway, where the ratio of capitalization cost to revenue is often much higher than that of film, DTP tends to make choices that preserve its financial interests. In Disney’s case, these film industry norms bleed into its Broadway producing practices— running down the same assembly line, perhaps, that DTP extended out into its other divisions to begin producing corporatized Broadway musicals.

This assembly line becomes more literal when considering the third of DTP’s synergy strategies, synergized production processes. That is, adaptation allows DTP to assemble its Broadway productions not just from their filmic sources, but from intertexts created as properties for other divisions (i.e. theme parks) or within DTP’s other activities. Any cross-medium adaptation benefits from its ability to riff on its source, but DTP’s internal model of the adaptation industry allows the company to extend and accelerate this

connection among different iterations of the same narrative. Thus, synergized production processes are effectively the corporatized extension of the process of adaptation.

When independent producers adapt from existing sources, their process of cross-medium adaptation generally progresses along a linear set of developmental steps— script writing, readings, workshops, and so on— all driving toward a singular theatrical product(ion). Disney, however, has access to other sources and resources for their adaptations. For example, the version of *Aladdin* that premiered on Broadway on March 20, 2014 was not developed directly from its 1992 source film but from a 45-minute live adaptation of the film that had been running in Disney’s California Adventure Park for more than a decade. Anne Hamburger created the Anaheim *Aladdin*, her first major project as head of entertainment for Disney Theme Parks, in 2002. It was a hit, though Hamburger had no intention to bring the production to Broadway. When DTP— an entirely separate division from Disney Theme Parks— was looking for a new property to develop for Broadway, they pulled Hamburger’s adaptation for expansion. In her explanation of *Aladdin*’s path to Broadway, Osatinski suggests that “with the show already partially formed, DTP saved money on development, as they did not have to start from scratch” (423). That is, Disney’s choice to engage in repetition supports their economic sustainability, with each division making its products available for reinterpretation by other divisions. Though Osatinski does not use the word *synergy* here, it is useful to see this path to production, with its roots in the theme park, as another of Disney’s synergy strategies. Just as the company’s products drive revenue and act as marketing for one another, so too do they become a part of one another’s development.

Even within DTP itself, the company has created opportunities for production processes to feed off of one another. Disney Theatrical Group does not only work on the Broadway productions of Disney’s titles: it also develops titles for licensing to

communities and schools; conducts educational programs in multiple states; and oversees all productions and tours of DTP productions globally. Some of these properties developed for licensing, like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, have gone on to enjoy long, profitable international runs without ever taking a Broadway bow. Even *Tarzan*, which flopped on Broadway, went on to run for ten years in Germany in a revised version. Disney's *Newsies* (2012) made the opposite transition when a production meant to test the script for licensing took off and became DTP's next Broadway sensation. At the Nederlander Theater, *Newsies* became DTP's fastest-recouping Broadway production to date (Osatinski 422). Like Hamburger's *Aladdin*, *Newsies*' path to Broadway was made possible by business synergy. Both productions were adapted from Disney films, and neither initially had Broadway ambitions. Despite the intentions for these productions, however, synergy within and among different business divisions allowed Disney to extend its production processes into these properties and redirect them toward Broadway.

*Newsies* and *Aladdin*, having made their Broadway bows, were then catapulted through the next iteration of DTP's synergized production processes: international and touring replicas. In keeping with the megamusical format, post-Broadway productions of Disney's shows often adhere as closely to their Broadway counterparts as possible. Across the country and the world, new actors and technicians mimic the aesthetic content of their Broadway predecessors. By collapsing the theatrical development process in these reproductions, DTP makes theatre more efficient. Fiscally, this strategy has had impressive payoffs, including the billions of dollars Disney has raked in on productions of *The Lion King*— a musical the company invested \$15 million for development, or \$21 million inclusive of the renovations on the New Amsterdam. This return on investment, while not standard for Broadway musicals, makes *The Lion King* a more profitable venture than most Blockbuster films. For Ken Cerniglia, former Dramaturg and Literary Manager for Disney



Theatrical Group, these synergized production processes were a “benefit of working for Disney because we had multiple places to produce. So just having something on Broadway... for a lot of shows that’s like the destination. For us, that was kind of the first swipe back and we got to do it again” (Cerniglia). Because Disney’s business model functions more as a web than a linear path, Cerniglia and his colleagues could revisit narrative properties in various theatrical extensions. Once this web of business synergy relationships is in place, each property can— as Cerniglia notes— “have various versions and go to different places and meet the markets there” (Cerniglia).

Despite the potential for financial success and iterative creative processes that synergized production processes offer, Burston warns that the increased profits may come at an artistic cost that prevents replica productions from achieving artistic independence from their flagship productions:

It is in the moment of Broadway *re*-production, however, that newer, cybernetic forces of simulacral replication kick into gear, that the once-strong sense of the stage musical as a unique subject-experience is lost to the extension of the theatrical franchise and to its endless generation of spectacular object-commodities. This is the moment when both Broadway fans and Broadway professionals run into trouble. The subsequent push of the spectacular franchise is, either tacitly or explicitly, based upon a *template* of an original production whose cast and creative team have already completed all the exciting collaborative work of turning written pages into breathing performance. The *template* of this collaboration, however, is not itself collaborative: it is starkly, soberingly reified, then licensed internationally. Such is the megamusical's sobering global legacy, and if it is not entirely uniform it is certainly widespread. (Burston 166)

Here, Burston laments the loss of the “unique subject-experience” that many theatre practitioners, scholars, and fans alike believe is at the heart of the theatrical experience. The glimmer of liveness and ephemerality supposedly that draws audiences is tempered by the sense that the performance might not be so unique after all. Disney— like other megamusical producers— is willing to make this tradeoff. Producers of replica productions

forfeit cooperation in favor of efficiency. By bending live theatre into a commodity made for international markets through the logics of capitalist reproduction, these producers widen their profit margins. Disney, as the largest and most globalized of the megamusical producers, simply implements these strategies on the grandest scale. As I will argue in the following section, these business practices— synergized marketing efforts, revenue streams, and production processes— has had precisely the long-term aesthetic impacts that Burston worries about.

### **DISNEYFIED ADAPTATIONS: TRANSFORMATION VS. MIMESIS**

From 1994 to 2020, Disney Theatrical Productions had at least one show running on Broadway at all times. Almost all of these productions were adapted from Disney films, and almost all would be classified as megamusicals. Despite these apparent similarities and the shared business strategies underpinning the productions, the aesthetics of these productions and their relationships to source material varied widely. Some productions have been styled as theatrical analogues to their filmic sources, while others make greater departures from the aesthetics of their filmic antecedents. Across nearly three decades of Disney on Broadway, critics have often responded more positively to the more transformative productions and remained disdainful of the more mimetic properties, though DTP has avoided particularly transformative works in their more recent productions— particularly following the two consecutive productions that failed to recoup in the mid-2000. For about a decade, DTP has proceeded in a more iterative mode of production that requires deeper collaboration with the network of other Disney divisions in the assembly of their Broadway properties. Additionally, DTP has ramped up their efforts to create properties for licensing. This section traces the production strategies and accompanying critical reception of DTP's work on Broadway, and between those sources

a narrative emerges in which business interests trump artistic risk and dynamism. Rather than produce innovative works that further evolve the musical format, DTP has chosen to take on the less adventurous role as Disney's theatrical outpost. I argue that this is a tradeoff brought on by consistent participation in the adaptation industry; the choice to adapt allows DTP to maximize business synergy, but it also limits the company's range on Broadway in a way that draws the ire of critics and scholars alike.

Since the narrative I aim to study here concerns Disney's production of megamusical adaptations, the production history I analyze does not explicitly take into account Broadway concert versions (*King David* (1997)), productions with which Disney was associated but not listed as a producer (*Sister Act* (2011)), or nonmusical productions (*Peter and the Starcatcher* (2012)). Additionally, DTP's increasingly iterative approach to production means that a narrative of the company's presence on Broadway risks an artificial teleology. Disney's utilization of business synergy blurs the company's seemingly linear trajectory on Broadway, as many productions have enjoyed successful runs on international markets, in national tours, and in versions created for theme parks, educational productions, and community productions. That Disney's theatrical producing history is so slippery is a testament to the company's flexibility in dealing with its own narrative properties. At the same time, a production history that centers Broadway properties remains cognizant of the infrastructural limit on the Broadway landscape— its forty-one theatres— and the impact of Disney's constant presence in that ecosystem.

At the outset, Disney wanted to make musicals that clearly resembled their source material. Michael Eisner, then CEO of The Walt Disney Company, plucked Robert Jason Roth from Disney's theme parks division to direct *Beauty and the Beast* (1994). Roth received instructions to “stage the movie,” a conservative approach to adaptation that prioritizes cinematic mimicry over the theatrical reinterpretation of a narrative (Nelson 76).

By employing Disney personnel from a nontheatrical division and aiming for a mimetic adaptation from the *Beauty and the Beast* film, Disney had elected to engage in synergized production processes from the outset. The company compounded this choice by positioning Roth not as a craftsman, but as a worker in charge of the next step of *Beauty and the Beast*'s assembly line of production. This approach paid off at the box office to the tune of \$28,453,512 in gross revenue in 1994 alone ("Cumulative Broadway Grosses"). Today, the production's cumulative gross revenue of more than \$429 million makes it the 11<sup>th</sup> highest grossing Broadway production of all time, placing it just behind *Cats* ("Cumulative Broadway Grosses"). However, critical and scholarly acclaim did not accompany this financial success. In a 1995 article entitled "Broadway and the Beast: Disney Comes to Times Square," Steve Nelson disparaged the production as "a theme park where the seats stay put" (Nelson 79). Disney had created a recognizable, packageable, spectacular entity; narrative complexity and artistic risk had as little a place on stage at *Beauty and the Beast* as they did on the rides at Disney World.

DTP's approach for their next production, *The Lion King*, flew in the face of the criticisms Nelson and his contemporaries had lodged at *Beauty and the Beast*. Following *Beauty*'s success, Walt Disney Company CEO Michael Eisner handed off executive control of DTP to two men with theatrical roots, Peter Schneider and Thomas Schumacher. Under their leadership, DTP began work on its most acclaimed, highest grossing musical to date: *The Lion King*. Schumacher and Schneider picked avant-garde director and puppeteer Julie Taymor to helm the production, and her work departed significantly from its animated source material. Under Taymor's direction, the pendulum of DTP's adaptation strategies swung from mimicry to utter transformation. Taymor's re-conception of *The Lion King* spanned from the fabrication of the wearable puppets that create the show's trademark human-animal hybrid silhouettes to a partnership with South African composer

Lebo M. that led to new music for the stage version (Osatinski 417). Choreographer Garth Fagan combined African, Afro-Caribbean, ballet, and modern dance influences to create a unique movement style that effectively communicated dramatic action and the uniqueness of the production's animal characters. *The Lion King* opened to enthusiastic support from audiences and critics alike. New York theatregoers and tourists flocked to the New Amsterdam to see the show, which went on to become the darling of the 1998 Tony Awards. When Taymor took home the Tony for Best Direction, she was the first woman to ever have done so. The popularity of Taymor and DTP's collaboration has not ebbed: to date *The Lion King* is the highest grossing and third longest running production in Broadway history.

The matchup of Disney's corporate heft and Taymor's avant-garde sensibilities puzzled and amused critics, who thrilled to see a production in which avant-garde artistic chops were bankrolled by corporate funds. In laudatory reviews, the success of this pairing puzzled and amused critics. Michael Feingold rejoiced that Taymor had "faced the corporate gorgon and survived," while Ben Brantley saw Taymor and Disney as an "artistic marriage of the corporate giant and the bohemian iconoclast" whose collaboration on *The Lion King* "might indeed live in blissful harmony" (Sternfeld 324; Brantley, "The Lion King") In Feingold's metaphor, Taymor becomes a Greek hero who endures the risk of artistic petrification to bring her superior art to the masses. In Brantley's, she is the mismatched bride to another kind of monster. Whether bravely or delicately, both see Taymor as an intervention in Disney's stale, artistically bereft approach to theatremaking. Behind the comic positioning of the Disney-Taymor partnership here, there is the whisper of a belief in this corporate-experimental crossover— in artistic risk bankrolled by corporate structures. Perhaps Disney could be trusted on Broadway, if only they continue on this path.

While *The Lion King*'s artistic choices indicated a clear departure from *Beauty and the Beast*'s mimetic approach, the two shows both utilized this synergized system of megamusical producing and marketing strategies. With its business interests shored up—or at least padded in comparison to other Broadway productions—did Disney become the paragon of theatrical innovation that *The Lion King*'s reviewers hoped to see? Not exactly. Osatinski argues that *The Lion King* “represents what DTP strives to achieve as a producer: take a highly successful title from the Disney catalogue and produce it in an artistically innovative way while adhering to the tenets of the Disney brand” (Osatinski 417). Although none of the company's next few productions extended *Beauty*'s choice to actively inhibit their director's ability to stage something different from the movie, none of them made good on their promise either. *The Lion King* struck a unique balance between successful corporate and creative practices, one DTP would spend the next decade trying unsuccessfully to replicate.

Bolstered by these first two successes, DTP continued experimenting with new types of properties on stage. *Aida*, based on a children's book version of the Verdi opera of the same name, marked DTP's greatest departure from its adaptation-reliant synergy strategies when it premiered at the Palace Theater in 2000. Though Disney executives originally intended to make *Aida* a film, they pivoted to a theatrical adaptation following *The Lion King*'s success. DTP produced *Aida* through a new division, Hyperion Theatricals, to mark a departure from the company's family-friendly repertoire. The key players in the production's creation included *The Lion King*'s composer and lyricist, Elton John and Tim Rice, and Robert Jess Roth of *Beauty and the Beast* signed on to direct. Despite the established working relationships and previous successes of this team, the choice to stage a musical that was *not* an adaptation of a Disney property carried an air of uncertainty. In the *New York Times*, Barry Singer wondered “can Disney create a brand-

new musical with the substance of the best Broadway shows?” and then answered tentatively: “Perhaps” (Singer). Though the production ran for four years and racked up as many Tony awards, its success was as modest as its buildup. Brantley opened his *New York Times* review by calling the production “a Disney cartoon pretending to be a Broadway musical,” placing it in the same trite camp as *Beauty*; when the production folded in 2004, Hyperion Theatricals followed it (Brantley, “Destiny and Duty”).

DTP returned to their home base of megamusical adaptations from their own catalog for their 2006 production of *Mary Poppins*, this time without the ability to fully engage in synergy strategies. Though Disney possessed the rights to adapt their own *Mary Poppins* film, famed megamusical producer Cameron Mackintosh had secured the rights to the series of books that served as the film’s source (Osatinski 418). Neither Disney nor Mackintosh would surrender their claim on the property, so the two begrudgingly partnered on the production. After years of negotiations, both parties came to the table in 2002. The *Mary Poppins* musical opened in London in 2004 and on Broadway two years later, where it ran for 2,619 performances (“Cumulative Broadway Grosses”).

2006 marked a high point for DTP. Though neither of its two most recent productions were received with intensity that met *Beauty and the Beast* or *The Lion King*, both went on to recoup their initial investments and tour successfully. In producing *Aida* and *Mary Poppins*, DTP had strayed somewhat from the formula that had marked their first two productions. Neither began as an animated Disney film, and their strategies of adaptation both lay in the middle ground between mimesis and utter transformation. However, the machine of Disney’s synergized resources and marketing structures chugged along to support these efforts, anchored by the steady Broadway productions of *Beauty* and *The Lion King*. As Osatinski points out, upon *Mary Poppins*’ premiere at the New Amsterdam Theatre, DTP had “three successful productions running simultaneously in

New York, and not one failure to date” (Osatinski 419). Their ability to produce musical after musical without failing to recoup on their massive investments defied all odds. However, this perfect record had already begun to waver.

*Tarzan*, which opened mere months before *Mary Poppins*, would become the first of two DTP productions to bomb in quick succession. *Tarzan* presented unique challenges. The film had featured non-diegetic music by Phil Collins, and rewriting it for the stage required a greater musical transformation than previous DTP adaptations. Disney compromised some of the production’s recognizability through this departure. Then, there was the matter of the titular character’s mode of transportation: Tarzan needed to swing from vines. DTP sunk a good deal of time and money into solving this problem. They held workshops in Buenos Aires and Brooklyn to develop new theatrical flying technology based on rock-climbing equipment, and director Bob Crowley formed an “abstract approach” to embrace the organic movements that flying necessitated (Osatinski 420). Unfortunately, audiences and critics did not respond to these innovations, and *Tarzan* closed without recouping after 486 performances.

The following year, Disney closed *Beauty and the Beast* to mount *The Little Mermaid* in its stead, but this wager did not pay off. Brantley’s review in *The New York Times* accused the production of “achieve[ing] the dubious miracle of translating an animated cartoon into something that feels like less than two dimensions,” and neither awards nor audience enthusiasm rescued it from reputational mediocrity (Brantley, “Fish Out of Water”). By the end of the summer in 2009, Schumacher announced DTP would shutter *The Little Mermaid* as well, as it would be “fiscally irresponsible to [their] shareholders to risk operating losses with such a big show in the historically challenging fall months” (Ng). Disney had no intention to bring another failure to fruition. With *The Lion King* as the sole representative of DTP on Broadway, the company was becoming



more and more risk averse. It would be four years before DTP debuted another musical on Broadway. In this period, the company produced scripts for licensing and debuted their sole nonmusical production, *Peter and the Starcatcher*, regionally, off-Broadway, and on Broadway. Like *Aida*, *Peter and the Starcatcher* was adapted from a book that Disney had acquired rights to (*Peter and the Starcatchers* by Dave Barry), which meant that critics could not accuse the production of unimaginatively mimetic adaptation. Having lost the opportunity to skewer the corporation for its cartoonishness, in fact, critics often wrote glowing reviews that never mentioned Disney at all (Davidson, 2012; Brantley, “Effortless” 2012; Jones, 2015). Disney’s approach to the production differed, too, as the company refrained from an onslaught of international replica productions, cross-medium tie-ins, or other efforts to push *Peter* through the assembly line of DTP’s internal adaptation industry. It seems that DTP had begun to shirk away from their megasized Broadway experiments, or at least from productions with diminished opportunities for business synergy.

When DTP staged its next Broadway production in 2012, it was with the full embrace of available synergy strategies. DTP plucked *Newsies*, as already discussed, from its run at the Paper Mill Playhouse — a production that was meant not as an out-of-town tryout but as a pilot production to demonstrate that the new adaptation was ready for licensing. *Newsies* was based on Disney’s 1992 cult hit film, and fans of the production—called “fansies”—were clamoring to see it on stage (Osatinski 422). It ran for more than 1,000 performances on Broadway and recouped its initial investment at a staggering pace (Osatinski 422). That such a success came from efforts to develop a property for licensing was not illogical, of course, as DTP had begun to develop properties for licensing with more gusto around this time. Cerniglia spoke to this period as one in which “we realize that one of the sources of income for Disney Theatricals could be licensing”—and after

*Newsies*'s success the company again dug into its internal resources to identify a production they could develop through synergized production processes (Cerniglia). The 2014 production of *Aladdin* fulfilled those criteria. Along its route to Broadway, *Aladdin* collected just about every variety of business synergy that DTP could muster. Originally intended as an expansion of Hamburger's long-running one-act version meant for licensing, *Aladdin* became DTP's next Broadway project following the success of a run in Seattle. Prior to a Broadway tryout in Toronto, however, DTP licensed the production to regional houses to "see what they would do in their own production" (Cerniglia). The choice to pluck *Aladdin* from an existing property, and to workshop it extensively before transferring it to Broadway, indicates the new sense of caution and a reliance on nontraditional routes to Broadway that characterizes DTP two decades into its commercial theatre ventures.

When *Frozen* opened in 2018, it continued Disney's more careful approach. The 2013 film was rapidly redeveloped into a stage musical with a book by Jennifer Lee and music and lyrics by Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez—the same team that had created the film. In fact, plans for *Frozen*'s Broadway adaptation were in the works before the film had even received its theatrical release, as part of a company-wide effort to develop and exploit *Frozen* across all platforms. This emphasis on continuity between film and theatrical versions of *Frozen* certainly served Disney's bottom line, but critics left the Broadway production feeling that it was insufficiently theatrical. Writing in the New York Times, Jesse Green ends his review with the following call to action:

The question for me is whether Disney, with the endless resources and talent at its disposal, wants to make its own magical transformation into adulthood. Does it want to create serious, coherent modern musicals instead of cartoons that hedge all bets? If so, it may be time to say let it go to the formulas and the merchandisable reindeer. (Green)

Here, Green lodges a familiar complaint— that the show is safe and childish, a “cartoon” on stage— in a way that places the blame squarely on Disney’s approach to musical theatre production. When Green sneers at “formulas and merchandisable reindeer,” he is taking aim at precisely the business practices that have made Disney a continued success. If asked whether Disney movies make good musicals, Green might respond as the Blank Page did in “An Original Musical”: *well, they make musicals.*

It seems that Disney has come full circle— from a production of *Beauty and the Beast* that aimed to “stage the movie” to a production critics view as a cartoon, and from “a theme park where the seats stay put” to a production with its actual origins in a theme park (Nelson 79). By utilizing the megamusical form and business synergy, Disney has created an entire internal adaptation industry that facilitates production across mediums. Though Disney has demonstrated an ability and interest in producing new work (*Aida*) and making serious artistic innovations (*The Lion King*, *Tarzan*), the company’s recent productions suggest that theater is merely another medium in which narrative properties can be exploited. This approach to production enacts Burston’s warnings about theatre reduced to the template of collaboration— the kind of theatre that is inhospitable to all but Russell’s corporate actors. Disney’s assembly line of Broadway and Broadway-adjacent properties shows no signs of stopping or slowing down: a sit-down production of *Frozen* opened in Sydney, Australia in December 2020, and DTP has recently announced its intention to produce its first revival, *Beauty and the Beast*, when Broadway theaters reopen. The revival will follow only a few years after another *Beauty and the Beast* adaptation, a live action film adapted from the original cartoon. Perhaps “anything can happen if you let it,” as Mary Poppins suggests, but the trajectory Disney’s production strategies indicates how unlikely it is for the company to let just “anything” happen anytime soon.

## Chapter 2.

### Resisting the Novel: Elevator Repair Service's *Gatz*

When *Gatz* finally made its New York premiere in 2010, Elevator Repair Service (ERS) had been waiting five years. The company's word-for-word staging of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* had been mostly barred from performing stateside due to the concurrent development of Simon Levy's commercial adaptation of Fitzgerald's novel. When ERS tried to mount a workshop production in New York in 2005, the Fitzgerald estate sent a cease-and-desist email that shut the production down (Zinoman). Though the particulars of Levy's agreement with the Fitzgerald estate remain somewhat unclear, it seems the production had reached an agreement for semi-exclusive rights to adapt the novel into a play. As a result, *Gatz* could not run in a market that would compete with the other production or cause potential audiences to confuse the two. This is how John Collins, artistic director of ERS and director of *Gatz*, explained the delay to me— as a minor issue of legality that had ultimately worked out for the best. Besides, he said, five years “is just the time that *Gatsby* waited for Daisy” (Collins). Just as *Gatsby* spends five years accumulating capital— both social and financial— ERS spent their five year wait accumulating reputational and monetary gains. Stunted relations with the Fitzgerald Estate could have been enough of a reason for ERS to put *Gatz* on ice, but the company instead turned that limitation into an opportunity to further develop *Gatz* while establishing its reputation. ERS toured the production to festivals abroad, drumming up international support and domestic anticipation for the production. By the time *Gatz* made its triumphant New York premiere at the Public Theatre in 2010, ERS had turned the Fitzgerald Estate's limits into boundaries they could push, parlaying legal parameters into global success.

The persistence and irreverence that marked ERS's relationship with the Fitzgerald Estate characterizes all facets of the company's approach to adaptation. This subversive handling of legal restrictions is but one example of ERS's intentional engagement with limitations, especially those inherent in adaptation, in the process of creating *Gatz*. ERS's work on *Gatz* provides a robust case study in the way that theatremakers can interpret adaptation industry's constraints as challenges to engage with rather than restrictions that require acquiescence. ERS approached *Gatz*, like their other shows, with a mission to create theatre through the collective problem-solving, a process that does not shy away from the possibility of failure. The company returns to adaptation across their oeuvre to provide problems of medium-specificity that they can solve through the process of rehearsal. In their work on *Gatz*, specifically, adaptation allowed ERS to experiment with formal qualities of theatre and potentially anticapitalist messaging while also engaging with a prestigious source in a way that could succeed in a capitalist market for high art. To understand the way that ERS both embraces and resists associations with capitalist values, I will analyze ERS's adaptation strategy through Peggy Phelan's understanding of performance as "representation without reproduction." Phelan argues that one power of performance lies in its ability to be representational without succumbing to the commodified sort of reproduction that capitalism mandates. However, *Gatz*'s association with its source allows the production to retain some of that reproductive quality without compromising a sense of theatricality.

ERS employs a strategy that stands in contrast to that of Disney Theatrical Productions and to the strategy of commercial theatre more broadly. Unlike ERS, Disney makes use of adaptation to facilitate their commercial musical properties, creating an internal version of the adaptation industry within a global, multiplatform entertainment corporation. Levy's commercial theatre adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* took a similar

approach, albeit on a smaller scale. In at least three places on [thegreatgatsbyplay.com](http://thegreatgatsbyplay.com), the Levy boasts about the play's status as "the only stage adaptation authorized by the Fitzgerald Estate," and Levy's own website markets this adaptation and two other plays based on Fitzgerald novels as a trilogy of "the first authorized adaptations that have been granted exclusive rights by the Fitzgerald Estate" (*The Great Gatsby*; Simon Levy). These repeated assertions of estate-granted authority trade on the reputation of Fitzgerald, a writer whose renown cannot be overstated, to defend the adaptations' legitimacy. However, Quinton Skinner's review for Levy's *Gatsby* suggests that clutching to authorial legitimacy can often beget a hollow theatrical experience. Skinner wrote that the production, in its premiere at the Guthrie Theatre, "work[ed] hard to make the most of material that will always breathe more heartily on the page than on the stage" (Skinner, "The Great Gatsby"). Levy was the most recent in a long line of *Gatsby* adaptors to receive this kind of criticism, which suggests that the novel somehow resists adaptation through some alchemy in its prose. Just as Disney uses adaptation to create business synergy, Levy's version of *The Great Gatsby* relies significantly on the authority of the Fitzgerald Estate to stave off the stench of bad reviews by enacting the protective capacity of the adaptation industry. ERS's approach stands in stark relief to these commercial endeavors. Rather than cultivate synergy, ERS employs adaptation to infuse their work with a certain level of entropy that they can then work against, making visible the effort and incongruity of their project. Where commercial theatre relies on adaptation to grease the gears of theatrical production, Elevator Repair Service gleefully jams that machinery.

### **IMPERFECT COPIES: ADAPTATION AS GENERATIVE FAILURE**

For ERS, adaptation from another medium provides an opportunity to set up problems and engineer potential solutions, trusting that any failures will beget new and

more interesting paths forward. According to Collins, once he realized that the ensemble gets excited about problem solving, he “just started looking for problems... good and interesting problems” that he could bring into the rehearsal room (Collins). In particular, the company is interested in troubling the restrictions of theatre as a form. By working with problems of form, Collins believes that “what theatre is starts to reveal itself in relief against your failed efforts to make it do something it can’t do” (Collins). In ERS’s experiments in cross-medium adaptation, theatre could collide with other mediums—fiction, film, dance, and even dramatic literature— to make work that is primarily interested in what theatre *is*.

In a 1999 interview with scholar-practitioner Coco Fusco, Collins and Steve Bodow (ERS ensemble member and associate director of *Gatz*) discuss that repeated impulse to work in adaptation. Bodow collapses adaptation and translation into one another, asking “what do you do when you’re translating into a language where the corresponding words don’t really exist? You have to get creative... It puts a personal stamp on whatever material you’re working with” (Fusco). Just as translation requires that the translator create an individualized set of solutions to the inexorable differences between languages, cross-medium adaptation allows ERS to create individualized, specific solutions because no singular, objectively correct adaptation can exist. In the same interview, Collins provides an example from ERS’s *Language Instruction* (1994), in which they aim to replicate a jump cut from the 1974 film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* and end up with a dance. “Just to recreate this film thing, onstage,” he says, “forces us to make a move, to create a move, which is the jump, the turn” (Fusco). In other words, it is the impossibility of adaptation that attracts ERS. In the imperfect analogues between mediums— which we might see as the failure to perfectly assimilate a narrative from one medium to another— ERS sees potential.

Part of that potential, as Sarah Jane Bailes writes in *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, is the possibility of failure. To Bailes, failure is not an endpoint, but an opportunity to destabilize the singularity of winning. Extended attention to failure turns it into a tool, such that one can see “losing as a way of winning another race whose objective has yet to be determined” (Bailes 148). Although this theory of failure does not refer directly to *Gatz*, it was certainly ERS’s intention to fail when they began working with the major gambit of the production. Unable to decide what bits of Fitzgerald’s text to keep and what to cut, the ensemble decided to state every word of the novel— including every “he said” and “she said,” as reviewers often note— as the text appears in the 1995 Scribner paperback. The outrageous decision to read the whole novel was informed, somewhat, by their work on *Language Instruction* (1994). That production had incorporated the work of comedian Andy Kaufman, who had a stand-up bit in which he would threaten to read all of *The Great Gatsby*. Taking up Kaufman’s bit would remove the burden of text selection and provide an outrageous problem that simply must fail— a supersized version of trying to stage a jump cut and discovering a dance. To their surprise, however, the unabridged text remained intact, with each page providing new problems to solve.

Just as ERS courts failure in their development process, so too does generative failure become a tool of the performance itself. When Scott Shepherd enters the stage at the top of Act I, he is not marked as any particular character from *The Great Gatsby*, but as an office worker dressed in the uniform of white color apathy: blue button down, tie, imperfectly ironed chinos, a tan trench he immediately removes. The office worker sips coffee from a paper cup and sits down to work, except his chunky desktop computer will not start up. This mundane disruption is the first failure of *Gatz*, and the man tries to get himself back on track by pressing the power button and then pressing it again. He holds the power button down and counts to ten, eventually getting out of his chair to check all



angles of the computer. Yet it is only when he gives up and flips open a rolodex to reveal a copy of *The Great Gatsby* that he gives himself permission to forego a functional computer. The novel, discovered in a moment of failure, becomes a catalyst to what Bailes would call “another race”—the word-for-word performance of the text—even if the rules and restrictions of that race have not yet revealed themselves.

Shepherd eventually takes on the role of Nick Carraway, narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, though he moves into the role in stages as if shifting through gears. As he begins to read the novel aloud, the office worker is tentative and keeps his eyes trained on the novel. He fails to read the novel fluently as interruptions from both his surroundings and the text itself cause him to pause. In a single paragraph on the second page, he stumbles three times: first to show a coworker that his computer won’t work and to hand off a folder; next at the line “Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book” to confirm that the man’s name really does appear on the cover; and finally at the word “Buckleuch,” which he stares at in the novel for a moment and then sounds out in a manner reminiscent of grade school reading comprehension lessons. Bailes might argue that this series of interruptions highlights ERS’s trend of “practice-as-discovery,” a choice ERS repeatedly makes in which they draw “upon the material of the ordinary and everyday world in order to move beyond it” (Bailes 149). These first ventures into reading, made heavy and slow by the literary text and environmental context, situate *Gatz* in the everyday world, dwelling on the effort that the office worker must put forth to accomplish his new task of reading *The Great Gatsby* aloud. Soon, the production will transcend that quotidian task. Stage action will start to resemble the scenes the office worker describes. Other actors will take on Fitzgerald’s dialogue, though not for at least half an hour.

As the production begins to evoke the reality of the novel, it effects a skewed take on mimesis that prevents actors from directly representing Fitzgerald’s characters by

placing an intermediary layer—the office worker frame—in between the two. Both this layering of character and the repeated use of failure support Catherine Love’s assertion that *Gatz* is “a performance in which process is underlined rather than obscured” (Love 187). Love argues in “By the Book: Adaptation, Work, and Elevator Repair Service’s *Gatz*” that *Gatz* makes visible the effort and “immaterial labour” of theatre workers. The multiple layers of character act as an arrow pointing back at the actor who is working hard to keep *Gatz* running. These actors’ frantic and artificially makeshift efforts to carry out the dictates of Fitzgerald’s text prohibit the parallel layers of character from collapsing in on one another.

This process, according to Collins, is one of “resisting the novel with our own theater ideas until eventually it just kind of rolls over and crushes us,” and by Chapter nine the production has run out of ways to resist (Collins). The stage has been depleted of resources, emptied of the office clutter and all of the actors save for Shepherd, whose transformation into Nick Carraway is complete. He recites the final pages from memory, setting the book down to perform without interruption. Shepherd’s isolation on this unbusy stage compounds Carraway’s harsh, disillusioned reassessment of his companions and the world they inhabit. In the wake of Gatsby’s murder, Carraway now views Tom and Daisy as “careless people... they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made” (Fitzgerald 179). Here, the performance and the text have come into alignment—with Carraway’s perception of smashing mirroring Collins’ feeling of being crushed. After six hours of effortful performance, the lack of resistance or distraction in these pages is felt keenly. Smooth and compressed, Carraway and *Gatz* make their simultaneous surrender.

## **GATZ GOES TO WORK**

Given the disillusionment and surrender that mark the end of *Gatz*, scholars have often interpreted *Gatz* as a production with a complex relationship to authority, and especially to the influence of capitalism and commodification. Reflecting on the function of Fitzgerald's text in the production, Barbara Fuchs writes that "in *Gatz*, the found text first seems to provide its anonymous office workers with an escape from late-capitalist ennui, yet ultimately sweeps everything away, leaving little in its stead" (183). Though the office workers stave off the mundanity of another day at the office, they are unable to replace it with a more fulfilling substitute. This interpretation supports an alternative reading of failure that Bailes puts forth, in which failure might "be understood as the willful disruption of power as authority through the repeated assertion of unauthorized practices" (Bailes 167). Certainly, the office's dissolution into Fitzgerald's novel qualifies as an unauthorized practice in the context of a white-collar work day. Following the logic of Bailes' claim, then, the failure to carry out an ordinary work day disrupts the authority of the office and, by extension, the capitalist system for which the office is a synecdoche.

I am hesitant, however, to fully endorse Fuchs' reading of *Gatz* as an escape from the trappings of late capitalism. While I agree that an audience member, perhaps attending *Gatz* on their day off, might interpret *Gatz* as a direct critique of capitalism, Fuchs' argument fails to take into account the fact that the actors on stage are also workers. In a fuller iteration of her argument, Fuchs asserts that "if the novel grapples with the self-fashioning of one *Gatz* into *Gatsby*, amid the moneyed and technological exuberance of the post-World War I era, the show considers how literature itself can provide an avenue for escape or rebellion in a late capitalist moment" (183). Fuchs sees the presence of the novel on stage as a salvation and a catalyst that allows the workers onstage to enter a literary universe. Reading, as a leisure activity, delivers these workers from the monotony

of capitalist productivity. Love productively complicates this interpretation of *Gatz* by through her analysis of the actors' work onstage as immaterial labor. While the office employees on stage might be escaping their daily grind by entering the world of *The Great Gatsby*, the actors on stage are simply doing their job. She notes, for example, that the office setting was not initially introduced as an emblem of late capitalism, but as a result of the real economic constraints ERS faced while creating the piece. ERS's first rehearsals for *Gatz* took place in an office above The Wooster Group's Performing Garage, largely because it would be more economical than renting proper rehearsal space. Love argues that, through the use of the office setting in performance, "the economic challenges that the company faces are turned around, used as creative spurs for their theatre, and defiantly displayed on stage in ways that begin to disrupt the usual stage fiction that attempts to hide labour" (191). Thus, *Gatz* stages an escape for its characters even as it displays the labor of the performers. It is for this reason that Love writes of theatre's utility as "one of the few places where work and leisure meet head-on" (193).

For Bailes, the disruption of power that *Gatz* stages has more to do with the commodification of art than labor practices under capitalism—though the two are certainly related. She argues that the irreverence and experimentation that mark ERS's work create "an assiduous composition of unsuccessful routes toward understanding, the artful making of a process that is discovering how to resist commodification" (Bailes 197). In this interpretation, ERS's orientation toward process rather than product constitutes a rejection of theatre as a product to be commodified. Jozefina Komporalý applies a similar argument to *Gatz*, especially when compared to the kinds of adaptations that dominate commercial entertainment: franchises, prequels/sequels, and spinoffs. "By steering clear of conventional adaptation practices," Komporalý argues, "*Gatz* and ERS resist the commercial connotations frequently attached to adaptations" (136). Komporalý might not

make the same argument about Levy's adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, for example, because the production utilized a more conventional approach to adaptation that included its participation in a trilogy of Fitzgerald adaptations and its exclusivity agreement with the Fitzgerald estate. Productions that utilize these conventions often understand adaptation as an opportunity to make theater more sustainable in a market economy by making an existing property available in a new medium and draw new audiences from fans of the source material. Since ERS views adaptation as a generative artistic problem instead of an economic solution, Komporaly and Bailes assert that the company dodges the taint of commercial association.

Because ERS is an experimental theatre company that takes nonprofit routes to production, however, this rejection of commodification is perhaps less risky than it seems. ERS has simply calibrated its risk for a particular sector of the arts market. Love writes that "in resisting conventional processes of adaptation, ERS also resists the commercial connotations that tend to attach to adaptations... but by preserving the prose of a canonical piece of literature, their production potentially secures itself in a place of high art discourses" (186). By operating in the realm of high art and nonprofit production instead of aspiring to a place among commercial ventures and popular entertainment, ERS engages with a different set of rules and values rooted in different economic structures. Commercial theatre must aim for broad appeal because it depends solely on ticket sales to recoup an initial investment. Nonprofit theatre, on the other hand, can also receive funding from public grants, private foundations, individual donors, and other means of financial support. The business model of commercial theatre therefore encourages strategies of commodification, and a production that actively rejected these strategies would run the risk of biting the hand that feeds it. Those productions might therefore measure success by box

office sales, but in high art circles a production's survival is more likely to be aligned with its accumulation of prestige.

### COURTING CANONICITY

*Gatz*'s reputation is quasi-legendary among self-proclaimed "theater people," due in no small part to the influence of critics and awards selection committees. Perhaps the 21<sup>st</sup> century's most enduring critical darling, *Gatz* has been lauded as "the most remarkable achievement in theatre not only of this year but also of this decade" in 2010 and again as "this decade's patron saint" in 2019 (Brantley, "Hath a Year Highlights?"; Shaw). *Gatz* spent almost fifteen years playing to sold out theaters worldwide, and it is often met enthusiastically with prestigious awards including the Zurcher Theater Spektakel ZKB Acknowledgement Prize, the Edwin Booth Award for Significant Impact on Theatre from The Graduate Center, CUNY, as well as wins at the Lucille Lortel Awards, Elliot Norton Awards, Obie Awards, and Los Angeles Drama Critics Awards. In the wake of such stunning success, Collins has individually received the United States Artists Fellowship, Guggenheim Fellowship, and Duke Performing Artist Award. Even the robust body of scholarship on *Gatz*, to which this thesis contributes, acts as further reinforcement of the production's status as a theatrical icon.

*Gatz*'s status as an adaptation of an already prestigious work of literature from the Western canon aids its accumulation of prestige. *The Great Gatsby* ranks second on the Modern Library's 100 Best Novels List, second only to Joyce's *Ulysses* ("100 Best Novels"). However, *Gatsby* is perhaps more widely read, and therefore less exclusive, than *Ulysses*. Michael Saffle, in his analysis of five *Gatsby* films, also makes the case for the novel's reputation as "one of accessibility as well as excellence" because of its prevalence in high school and college classrooms (Saffle). Therefore, *Gatz* begins from this point of

excellence, accessibility, and canonicity. Colleen Kennedy-Karpat and Eric Sandberg, authors and editors of the volume *Adaptation, Awards Culture, and the Value of Prestige*, borrow the term “capital intraconversion” in their writing on the way an adaptation can inherit prestige from its source. James English coined the term capital intraconversion in *The Economy of Prestige* in an effort to describe “the process by which ‘capital’ accumulated in one field of human activity... can be converted, more or less readily, into ‘capital’ in another symbolic area”— through processes of adaptation (Kennedy-Karpat and Sanders 4). In this model of prestige, *Gatz* has access to some of the prestige that *The Great Gatsby* has already accumulated.

If capital intraconversion were equally applicable to all adaptations of a canonical source, however, then all adaptations of *The Great Gatsby* would benefit equally from association with the novel. We need only recall Quinton Skinner’s passionate but unimpressed review of Levy’s *Gatsby* adaptation— “this show is working hard to make the most of material that will always breathe more heartily on the page”— to know that capital intraconversion is not, in fact, evenly distributed. Or if it is, then it is not enough to anoint a production with the level of prestige that attends *Gatz*. Although prestige is a slippery concept and difficult to parse objectively, Kennedy-Karpat and Sandberg make a convincing case that “internal aspects of a text can also signal prestige” (Kennedy-Karpat and Sanders 7). They provide the example of contemporary fiction, for which “certain narrative strategies associated with reading practices that require cultural capital” can lead to a level of prestige. In fiction, these strategies include fragmentation, “non-novelistic” digressions in the text, and other disjunctions. As a work of experimental theater, *Gatz* similarly employs aesthetic and compositional strategies that generate cultural capital, from its unusual duration to its detachment from mimesis. While I could imagine arguing that *Gatz*’s departures from its source— its office setting, in particular— could constitute

a disruption of *The Great Gatsby*'s canonicity, Kennedy-Karpat and Sandberg also suggest that mashups and transformations of a canonical text utilize the source's "unassailable canonicity to create meaning" (17).

*Gatz*'s relationship to canonicity is therefore multifaceted and mutually sustaining. Just as capital intraconversion allows *Gatz* to take advantage of *The Great Gatsby*'s prestige, *The Great Gatsby*'s canonical status is reinscribed by each successive adaptation. "By reintroducing canonized works into contemporary culture," assert Kennedy-Karpat and Sandberg, "adaptation is a powerful mediator between the canon and the zeitgeist" (12). Each time *The Great Gatsby* spawns a new adaptation, the novel is carried forward into a contemporary context. *Gatz*, for instance, became the inspiration for Rebecca Mead's 2010 *New Yorker* piece, "Adaptation," in which she both splices together a review of *Gatz* with a history of *The Great Gatsby*'s other adaptations and anecdotes about Fitzgerald's own forays into theatre (Mead). Canon, meet zeitgeist. This renewed relevance of the novel can even have economic implications. At performances of *Gatz* in non-English speaking countries, audiences often sit with a copy of the novel in their laps to follow along; no doubt some of these spectators purchased a copy for the performance, or at least increased its circulation at a local library. This mutually reaffirming relationship is not limited to just *Gatz* and *The Great Gatsby*. If each adaptation of the novel deepens its cultural significance and *Gatz* benefits from capital intraconversion through its connection with the novel, then each adaptation's reinforcement of *The Great Gatsby* also bolsters *Gatz*'s potential access to prestige.

Although ERS rejects the "conventional adaptation practices" that would link the production to processes of commodification, the company does understand the power of adaptation and canonicity in the economy of prestige. Collins has often said, of audiences, "you're not just in our hands; you are entirely in F. Scott Fitzgerald's hands as well."



Likewise, in a conversation with Philip Bither, Collins added that “we’re going to give you his work unabridged, and it’s not just a time-tested work, it’s the Great American Novel” (“Elevator Repair Service’s GATZ”). If you don’t trust ERS, Collins argues, you must at least trust this author and his words. When I asked him about this kind of statement, he spoke in economic terms, acknowledging that the trust in Fitzgerald is “part of how we are able to sell the idea at all... It’s like some degree of protection from some sort of avant garde theatre indulgence” (Collins). He repeatedly justifies the long run time of *Gatz* with similar logic, saying “it’s only as it needs to be”—just as long as every word of Fitzgerald’s text (Collins). This utter commitment to Fitzgerald’s work is a stabilizing force for *Gatz*, and one that ERS employs intentionally.

It is the stabilizing power of adaptation, with regard to prestige, that prompted Simone Murray to include an analysis of literary prizes when mapping out the adaptation industry. Murray’s investigation of the (Man) Booker Prize and the film adaptations of novels that have won the Booker suggests that this prize in particular holds an “incubator role in the contemporary adaptation economy” (130). Murray calculates that winning the Booker increases a novel’s chances of being adapted into a film to about twenty percent, a statistic Kennedy-Karpat and Sandberg cite to substantiate their claim that “the impetus for adaptation frequently arises from the conferral of prestige institutionalized by prize culture” (13). Although *The Great Gatsby*’s prestige is not localized in a single award, like the Booker, the production still aligns with Murray’s observation that “film-makers continue avidly to cultivate literary fiction’s associations with cultural prestige, just as they attempt the complex alchemy of transmuting that literary esteem into a quite different audio-visual medium” (Murray 128). Theatremakers, too, pursue prestige through literary associations. The films Murray surveys have a particular set of tactics for signaling literary prestige on stage: the inclusion of attribution like “from the pen of” or “based on the

bestselling novel by” during opening credits; scenes at typewriters or desks to indicate the writing of the story; voiceovers that include literary text; and others. Baz Luhrman’s 2013 film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, for example, includes all of these. *Gatz* provides a theatrical cognate of these tactics by the inclusion of a physical copy of *The Great Gatsby* on stage— particularly an edition of the novel that much of the audience would have held in their own hands as high school students. The book serves as a material reminder of the levels of prestige at play, which *Gatz* capitalizes on to sustain its experimental, durational staging.

This discussion of prestige complicates assertions that *Gatz* challenges commodification and commercialism. In truth, *Gatz* trades on the status of its source as a commodity. ERS trafficks in commercialism in a way that points to it but does not disengage fully. Love contends that “the promise of theatre in this mould lies... in a mixture of complicity of rupture,” meaning that *Gatz* both upholds and critiques the structures that support it. ERS’s embrace of these structures “render[s] their critique of capitalism internal and contingent, but powerful and necessary nonetheless” (Love 195). Love acknowledges that *Gatz* does not reform socioeconomic structures through performances that such alteration is perhaps not within the purview of theatrical performance. By pointing to these structures, however, *Gatz* creates a space to question their efficacy and observe their failings.

#### **A METONYM FOR A METAPHOR**

Throughout this chapter, I have worked to demonstrate the ways that *Gatz* makes use of multiplicity, simultaneity, and tension to draw unlike concepts close to one another. Onstage, multiple narratives intersect as the actors move through overlapping worlds, applying and shedding layers of character rapidly. A number of analyses of the production

reveal how aspects of ERS's work that both utilizes and discards commercialism. At the base of all of these linkages is that of theatre to literature—which is, of course, the implicit project of all page-to-stage adaptations. I contend that it is *Gatz*'s layering of theatrical and literary form that allows it to function in this way. Through adaptation, *Gatz* engages in multiple levels of representation that activate aspects of literature, as a medium, that are not shared by theatre.

I owe my use of the word *representation* here to Peggy Phelan, whose theorization on the concept of representation—and particularly on performance as representation without reproduction—underpins my argument. In “The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction,” Phelan develops an analysis of performance as a metonymic mode rather than a metaphorical one (147). That is, where other mediums collapse two into one—as writing does, for instance, when the word *cat* “repeatedly signifies” the same animal—performance allows the two to remain distinct (Phelan 149). Phelan writes that “in moving from the grammar of words to the grammar of the body, one moves from the realm of metaphor to the realm of metonymy” (150). Metaphor asserts that two things are the same—a word and the object it represents, for instance. I can write that the furry animal with whiskers, a tail, and a penchant for walking across my keyboard is a *cat*, but in doing so I reduce the animal to those three consecutive scribbles—*c-a-t*. Theatre, Phelan argues, does not face this conundrum. Representation in performance is uniquely metonymic in that it is “additive and associative” (150). The sign and the signifier do not erase one another. If a cat walks across the stage in performance, it is still a cat, though in the context of performance it may also signify more than it does alone.

When applied to *Gatz*, an understanding of metonym supports a reading of the multiple realities simultaneously at play on stage. Phelan writes that “in performance, the body is metonymic of self, of character, of voice, of ‘presence’” (150). Through

performance, then, Scott Shepherd's body can represent the office worker, the narrative voice of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway as a character, and Shepherd himself without risking the elision of these distinct individuals. Part of the thrill of *Gatz*, as critical responses suggest, is watching as the different realities the performers inhabit compete for attention in the same space without being folded into one another. As an intermediary layer, the office setting intervenes between reality and the plot of the novel, creating a sense of friction between the different layers of representation that ensures none can be forgotten. Reporting on this phenomenon through the lens of her own spectator experience, Rebecca Mead writes that "rather than dramatizing *The Great Gatsby*, *Gatz* dramatizes the experience of reading *The Great Gatsby*" (Mead). Put in Phelan's terms, *Gatz* represents the experience of reading *The Great Gatsby*, rather than the characters, plot, or other elements of the novel. Similarly, John del Signore told readers of *Gothamist* that "the show itself is a kind of gradual process of the novel becoming real much the way it does when you read something you love;" and Ben Brantley's review in *The New York Times* asserted that "you come to identify with the reader the way he identifies with Nick Carraway" (del Signore; Brantley, "Borne Back Ceaselessly"). *Gatz* mobilizes the metonymic quality of performance—this additive type of representation—to the level of consciousness for these reviewers, which they grapple with by describing *Gatz* as a theatrical representation of the act of reading *The Great Gatsby*. In this way, *Gatz* makes the presence of literary content tangible alongside the other layers of the theatrical event.

For Phelan, performance's key advantage is not just its metonymic quality, but the fact that metonym is nonreproductive. In writing, meanings are comparatively static and therefore more easily transported. The word *cat* can travel with more expediency and clarity than the animal can. The word is also available for reproduction in a way that the animal is not. In practice, this means that a reader picking up any given copy of *The Great*

*Gatsby* will have a functionally identical interaction with Fitzgerald's story, and reproductions of that story continue to be the same story. *Gatz*, on the other hand, changes with each performance, and though it can be documented through film and photograph, it cannot be reproduced at the level of mass circulation. Phelan rejoices in this fact, writing that "performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital" (148). I might argue, borrowing from Bailes' work in *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, that performance fails the test of reproduction and willfully disrupts that circulation of capital by disrupting the power of commodification.

With this in mind, I want to return to the difference between ERS's *Gatz* and Levy's *The Great Gatsby*. Just as ERS turned the theatrical form into a set of parameters to be challenged, the company also used the Fitzgerald Estate's limits into boundaries they could push. When ERS got special permission to perform *Gatz* stateside at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 2006, the production arrived only two months after Levy's *The Great Gatsby* had played in the same city at the Guthrie. Quinton Skinner reviewed both productions for *Variety*; while he lamented that in July that *The Great Gatsby* struggled with "material that will always breathe more heartily on the page than on the stage," he had changed his tune by September's review of *Gatz* (Skinner "The Great Gatsby"). ERS's production, Skinner wrote, "illuminates a familiar text, breathing strange new life into it while honoring its inherent completeness" (Skinner "Gatz"). Perhaps it is no coincidence that Skinner uses this metaphor of breath in both reviews: by honoring every word of Fitzgerald's text instead of altering them, the company gave breath to the prose instead of silencing it. By contrast, Levy's production gave more oxygen to the Fitzgerald Estate's legal authority than Fitzgerald's actual text. *Gatz*, with its more experimental concept and radical commitment to Fitzgerald's words, maintained the facilitative ability of adaptation

while also refusing to participate in excessive commodification that bogged down the more commercial production. In this way, *Gatz* “clogs the smooth machinery” enough to call attention to the existence of the machine, but not so much that the production remains strictly nonreproductive.

*Gatz* complicates the neat binary oppositions that Phelan sets forth by representing something reproductive in a nonreproductive medium. It is through this performative sleight of hand that *Gatz* becomes a metonym for a metaphor. That is, *Gatz* is metonymic of *The Great Gatsby*, which is a metaphor. Moreover, *Gatz* calls attention to the friction between the two different mediums— novel and play— by presenting several layers of meaning-making simultaneously on stage. When Collins said that *Gatz* “resists the novel...until eventually it just kind of rolls over and crushes us,” it was precisely this embrace of friction that he sought to express. If, as Phelan suggests, “the performance of theory, the act of moving the ‘as if’ into the indicative ‘is’... is to replot the relationship between the perceiver and the object, between the self and other,” then the sensation the reviewers of *Gatz* describe is the process of glimpsing the metaphor through the metonym (165).

Through this layering, ERS creates a quasi-reproductive mode of representation. In addition to giving audience members the sensation of “dramatiz[ing] the experience of reading *The Great Gatsby*,” this stacking of metonym and metaphor somewhat unclogs the “smooth machinery of reproductive representation” that Phelan is so eager to stop up. *Gatz* retains enough of the metaphor to benefit somewhat from *The Great Gatsby*’s reproductive nature, as we have seen in its access to capital intraconversion. However, it does not succumb utterly to the numbing effects of mass reproduction. It is for this reason that *Gatz*’s critique of capitalism is rendered “internal and contingent,” as Love asserts, though the

production's complicity with capitalist logics of facile reproduction has enabled *Gatz* to continue staging that critique.

#### **ADAPT. ADAPT AGAIN.**

Adaptation is nothing new. The creative team of *Gatz*, like the theatre workers at Disney Theatrical Productions and countless other companies, participates in an ancient practice when they translate narratives from another medium into live performance. That they do so in the contemporary United States means that these theatre practitioners and administrators work within a dense network of economic, legal, and cultural structures that collectively value replicable and reproducible commodities. Participation in the adaptation industry can fortify theatrical productions against the commodifying tug of the capitalist economic system by linking the production to a more static commodity from film, literature, or another medium. Essentially, adaptation offers an opportunity to create theatre that maintains a sense of ephemerality while bending the theatrical form toward commodification. I have argued throughout this thesis that the adaptation industry offers this benefit, although theatre practitioners working in cross-medium adaptation must individually navigate the tradeoffs that participation in the adaptation industry demands. In other words, they must adapt.

At the same time, then, adaptation is always new. Or rather, it is the synthesis of something new and something not-new-- the past and present colliding inside the secure container of a theatrical experience. Hutcheon offers that this synthesis is not just a characteristic of adaptation, but a significant draw for those who create and witness adaptation. She writes that some of the satisfaction of adaptation “comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise. Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an

adaptation; so too is change” (Hutcheon 4). For audiences of *Gatz* or any of Disney’s Broadway musicals, recognition of the characters and plotlines generates a sense of pleasure that is compounded by the experience of the narrative in a new form. The past decks itself out in the present tense, creating a sense of wonder. The adaptation industry comprehends the power of repetition with variation; in fact, it exists to cultivate and capitalize upon new products that echo extant ones.

In this thesis, I have focused on the ways that the “encompassing adaptation industry both constrains and— crucially— *enables* adaptation” in an effort to parse the potential stakes and rewards of theatrical adaptation (Murray 6). My investigation into theatre’s position in the adaptation industry revealed that adaptation always impacts both the artistic and business operations of theatrical production, though the nature of this impact ranges significantly depending upon the particular approach. Through this exploration of some mechanisms and strategies that theatre adaptation practitioners have successfully used, I have positioned adaptation as a strategy that theatremakers can employ. I do not see the tradeoffs that the adaptation industry requires as a reason to call for an end to adaptation, but for a more complex understanding of the way that adaptation impacts theatre making. It is my hope that greater comprehension of the adaptation industry might beget a more intentional use of its network in a way that lets artistry and commerce work together without one negating the other.



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